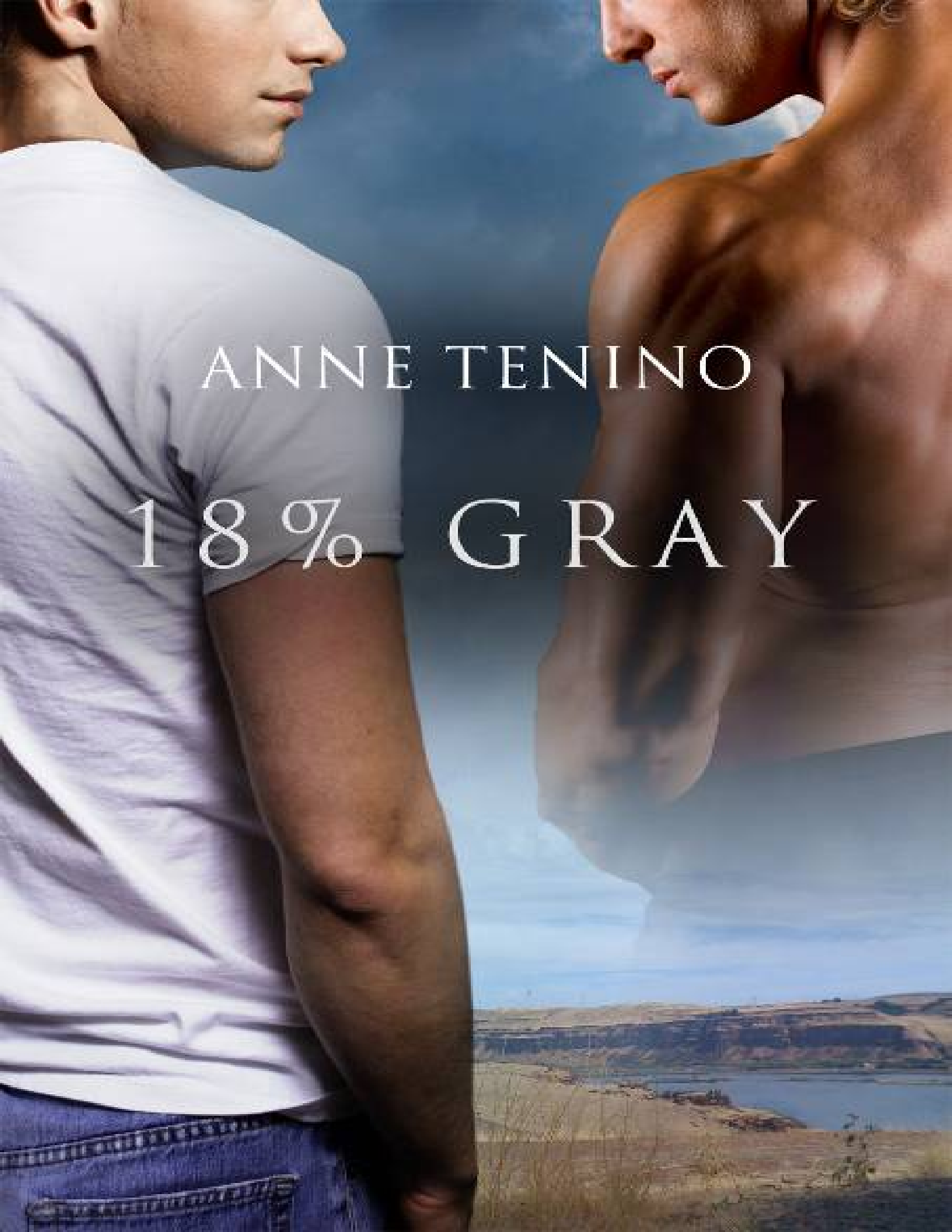
ANNE TENINO
18% GRAY

18% GRAY

ANNE TENINO

Published by
Dreamspinner Press
4760 Preston Road
Suite 244-149
Frisco, TX 75034
http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

18% Gray
Copyright © 2011 by Anne Tenino

Cover Art by Anne Cain annecain.art@gmail.com

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the Publisher, except where permitted by law. To request permission and all other inquiries, contact Dreamspinner Press, 4760 Preston Road, Suite 244-149, Frisco, TX 75034
http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/

ISBN: 978-1-61372-078-3

Printed in the United States of America
First Edition
August 2011

eBook edition available
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61372-079-0

—PROLOGUE—

March 2104

MATT spent the time on his knees thinking. Oh, he *should* have been concentrating on the dick in his mouth, but he'd lost interest in it a few weeks ago. About one week after he'd started putting said dick in his mouth.

Actually, it wasn't so much the dick in his mouth he was sick of; it was the dick attached to it.

"Dude, deep-throat me," Steve begged in a whiny voice.

Matt had learned from recent experience that snorting in derision when you were giving a guy a blow job didn't end well for either party. He sent Steve a scathing look. *Yeah, that's gonna happen.*

If Matt weren't a hormonal, sex-deprived sixteen-year-old, he probably wouldn't even be hard.

Oblivious to Matt, Steve thrust his hips a little. Matt planted his hands on Steve's hips and held them still against the tractor Steve was leaning on. The dumbass moaned.

Matt was *so* getting a blow job this time. No more letting Steve get away with the hand job treatment. He'd managed to convince Steve to blow him—what? Three times, maybe? And in that same period of time Matt was

sure he'd given Steve… let's see… two to three blow jobs a week—he'd call it 2.5—for five weeks was… 12.5 blow jobs.

Look, ma! He could suck cock and do math at the same time!

He should have made Steve blow him first. He sighed around Steve's erection. Live and learn.

"Oh, yeah, suck it, baby," Steve moaned. This guy watched too many porn vids. To pass the time, Matt reviewed how he'd ended up here on his knees.

Fact: Matt was the only out kid in their high school. Announcing you were gay wasn't that typical in a small town, even in a state like Oregon, where ninety-five percent of the people had joined the Blue States of America after the Split in '56. Oregon had mostly just lost Ontario and a little of the southeastern corner in '56 when Idaho went Red.

Fact: Statistically, Matt knew there had to be about fourteen other queer guys in his school. There were 230 kids in the whole K-through-12 school in Weimer. If about twelve percent of the population was queer, that meant there were twenty-eight gay or lesbian kids in school. Half of them were of no interest to him, having the wrong equipment and all. That left fourteen potential playmates for him. But they could be in kindergarten for all he knew.

Fact: Weimer was the largest town in the county, at just under 3,000 people, plus another couple thousand on outlying ranches. The closest school district to Weimer was 120 kilometers away, and it had fewer than one hundred kids in it.

Fact: He could forget sex with some sympathetic guy out of high school (or, you know, some elderly pervert—he was sixteen; he wasn't that picky). Matt wouldn't be of age for two more years, and no one would fuck with an underage kid in his family. Most of his cousins—and his

mom—knew three ways to eviscerate someone with their pinky nail. Crap, *he* knew that. It was a requirement of growing up in the Kell-Viteaux clan.

Conclusion: It was going to be really fucking hard for him to get any action in this town. Like, ever.

Clearly, tactical planning was necessary. So, he'd come up with a simple two-step plan.

Step 1: He was a horny sixteen-year-old queer boy in an isolated, conservative community. He also happened to be relatively attractive. Instead of hunting his prey, it seemed easier to become the prey. So he very publicly came out in September.

Step 2: Wait to be caught.

Result? By February not a single underage, horny, closeted guy had come on to him. It looked like the plan was a bust.

So when Steve came on to him one drunken night last month? Matt was so happy for another guy to touch him that he jumped at the chance. Literally. Climbed right up Steve.

So now he had a closeted boyfriend. Really, fuck-buddy was a more accurate term.

So, yay! Matt was fucking around with the quarterback of the football team, but no one *knew* it except Matt's family (well, he hadn't worked up to telling Dad yet, but Mom and the grampas knew). Not only could he *not* brag about his hot fuck-buddy, but the fuck-buddy had misplaced his personality to top it off.

Somehow, this wasn't as great as he thought it would be when he had come up with the grand plan to get some action. Too bad his closeted fuck-buddy didn't blow him more, to make up for it. And, you know, for being generally

boring. But Steve was the only game in town, and they both knew it.

Steve started to make those noises he made when he was getting close, and Matt snapped back to attention. Oh, yeah. Sucking cock. Matt glanced up at Steve.

Ugh. He was too… classically handsome. Dark hair, built, tall, perfect nose. Too cliché. Of *course* the totally hot quarterback was gay! Matt closed his eyes and imagined Steve as someone else. It was the only way he was going to get this done. Matt just wasn't capable of giving it that necessary extra little bit if he had to give it to Steve.

Matt imagined the guy he imagined every time he sucked Steve off anymore. The guy who probably wasn't gay, but telling himself that hadn't stopped Matt from wanting him. James Ayala. Steve's best friend.

James didn't go in for a lot of the high school hubris Matt saw in most jocks (exhibit A? Fucking his mouth). James had self-confidence, and he didn't need to treat anyone like shit to make himself feel better. He never bullied or ridiculed. He was the original strong, silent type, who understood what personal integrity was before most guys had even heard of it.

And if James was a little less than classically handsome? Something about the way he was put together, and the way he moved, and the way Matt felt when James looked at him more than made up for it.

So it was James's hard cock he was sucking right now. He could feel James's hand in his hair, gripping it tight, almost painfully tight. Forcing him to take it. Matt shivered at the idea and sucked harder, humming a little.

Steve gave a grunt, ruining Matt's good time.

Why was that fantasy a turn-on when he imagined James doing it, but if Steve did it Matt felt compelled to

twist his sac?

Matt opened his eyes and started pulling off Steve. He didn't know if he could finish if the guy was going to make *noise* and ruin his fantasy.

That's when Matt saw the guy standing in the door of Steve's family's machine shed. Backlit, he was mostly a silhouette, but there was just enough interior light that Matt could make out his face.

"James," Matt breathed.

Steve froze and then gave himself whiplash cranking his head toward the door.

"Fuck, dude!" Steve yelped, pushing on Matt's shoulders.

"Shit," Matt groaned, pulling his hands off Steve's hips. He didn't see how this could be good.

"Jesus Christ!" James spat, his face going red with anger and… was that hatred?

Then James turned and walked out.

Steve tried to get Matt to finish but Matt told him to fuck off and left, looking for James. Matt climbed on his crotch rocket, not entirely sure what he was doing but knowing he needed to talk to him. It wasn't like they were close friends, exactly, but James had been really cool to him. They were friendly.

He found James outside his family ranch house, plugging in his own crotch rocket. Matt pulled up silently, just the gravel crunching under his wheels. He raised the shield on the rocket, apprehensive and unsure what he was going to say.

Shit. He knew James could hear him, but he kept his back to Matt. Matt figured his best approach was a brazen one. He got off the bike.

“Th’fuck?” Matt asked James, walking up behind him.

James stood up from where he’d been stowing his helmet behind the seat. “I didn’t know you were a fag,” James said coldly, not even turning around.

Matt felt like someone had kicked him in the nuts. No one said the F-word anymore. Unless they were one. Then it was okay. But otherwise? Nuh-uh.

But it was so much more than that.

“How could you not know I was queer, James? *Everyone* knows I’m queer. Somebody lased it into the bathroom wall! ‘Need your cock sucked? Call Matt Tennimore.’”

“Yeah, I saw it.” James wouldn’t look at him, disgusted. “I just thought it couldn’t be true about someone like you.”

“Whadya mean, ‘someone like me’? Someone skinny and short and kinda effeminate?” It was a measure of how upset Matt was that he called himself effeminate. Most of the time he refused to admit he *might* be.

Not that there was anything wrong with it, of course.

“No!” James finally looked at him, the same look in his eye that he’d had when he’d found Matt on his knees in front of Steve’s cock. “Someone I *liked*.” James turned and stalked off toward his front door.

“But if you *like* me….” Matt wanted to kick his own ass as soon as he opened his mouth.

James turned but just gave Matt that stony look he was so good at. He snorted in disgust. “Gimme a fucking break. You think I’m going to hang out with a faggot like you?”

“What about Steve? He’s a fag too! He still your friend?” Matt called after him.

All he got in reply was a slamming front door.

Matt waited a minute. He felt hot and cold by turns, and his fists were clenched so hard he could feel the nails bite into his palms. It wasn’t the worst treatment he’d gotten in this fucking town, but it hurt the most.

This can’t end like this.

But it did, of course.

FOR the next four months of school, James was Matt’s enemy. Cold looks, snide comments in class, and a lot of James pretending Matt didn’t exist.

Finally James went off to Oregon State, and Matt breathed a sigh of relief. Probably partly because Steve went off to college too. Matt was pretty fucking sick of Steve by then.

Not that he ever touched him again after that day, but Steve kept bugging him to.

James’s leaving felt like a splinter in his chest. Not because he gave a shit, but because *what a fucking dick*! No one gave him that kind of shit! He had relatives in Special Ops, and they’d kick James’s sorry ass for calling Matt a fag.

Except he didn’t ever tell them about it, because he didn’t want anyone to know what a loser he was. It certainly wasn’t because he wanted to save James’s ass.

—CHAPTER 1—

October 2111

MATT walked into the QESA office first, but no one was there except Bull. Bull had gotten his nickname for very obvious reasons, and Matt thought it was kinda funny to see a huge, broadly muscled guy two meters tall scrunched down at the dispatch center, hunching over the embedded vid-datascreen. Bull had been seriously injured on an extraction last week and was apparently still taking it easy.

"Queer Extraction Services Association, can I help you?" Bull was saying into the vid-datascreen.

Matt waited for him to finish the call and said hi.

"Wish I was out in the fucking field," Bull grouched when Matt asked him what was up. "Lance is in the house," he added before Matt could ask.

"How much longer you stuck being the receptionist?"

"Nothing wrong with bein' a receptionist." Bull scowled sulkily. "Known some pretty hot receptionists."

"Yeah? So you're thinking about quitting fieldwork and making this a permanent gig?"

"Fuck no!" Bull's voice went so high it almost cracked. "'Sides, gotta get outta here. Make room for the new trainee tomorrow."

“New trainee, huh?”

“Yeah, you’re gonna *love* workin’ with him.” Bull was smirking.

“Yeah? He hot?”

Bull gave another little smirk. “Oh, he isn’t really your type.”

“Is he your type?”

Bull looked thoughtful. Then he shook his head. The vid-datascreen chimed again. Another incoming call.

So Matt went on in to the old farmhouse to find Lance. The house was almost 250 years old and had been in the family since it was built. It was kind of nice to have that kind of connection to the past. Although it was ridiculously outdated. No house-bots, no sonic shower, no embedded tech (other than security devices). The list went on.

“Lance?” Matt hollered as soon as he was in the back door. Nothing. “Grampa?” Sometimes Lance refused to answer to anything but Grampa, but not when it was work. Judging from the message Matt had received, this was work.

“Grampa?” Matt tried again.

Still nothing. Matt started searching the house, but he ran across Lance and Sid almost immediately, making out on the couch like they were in their twenties and not their seventies. Well, Lance was in his seventies.

“*Aaaaaahh*! My eyes! I’m blind!”

All he got was a pissy look. “Go back in the kitchen and make coffee,” Lance told him grumpily. “We’ll be there in a minute.”

“Didn’t you guys hear me come in?”

“We were busy.” Grampa Sid smiled at him, his leg still wrapped around Lance’s thigh.

Horny old bastards.

Matt went into the kitchen. If he was going out on a job, this might be one of the last chances he'd have for home-brewed coffee for a while. He was going to enjoy it.

He stood in front of the coffeemaker, tapping his fingers impatiently while it got its shit together and ground up some beans. He glanced up at the wall behind it.

Jesus, these old people.

"Lance!" he hollered.

"Right behind you," Lance answered practically in his ear, making Matt jump. Show-off.

"You may still be all ninja quiet, old man, but you guys haven't changed the damn calendar since last year. It's not even a digital calendar. It's October and this thing is on December 2110."

Lance shrugged. "Sid likes the picture. I keep it there for him. Makes him happy."

"Where'd Grampa Sid go, anyway?"

"Why does he get to be called Grampa Sid, but I just get Lance?"

"You're my boss. Where is he?"

"He has a new hoverboard he's trying out."

"Jesus, Lance! Those things are dangerous. He's almost seventy. He shouldn't be riding that."

"I make him wear a harness."

"Yeah, but does he?" Sid was a fucking daredevil on a board, in spite of being generally subdued otherwise.

"Yep." Lance smiled a little evilly. "Surprise inspections. And if he doesn't pass, the consequences are grave."

Matt *so* didn't want to know what the consequences were. He poured them each a cup of coffee.

"What are you doing here?" Lance asked him when Matt handed over the coffee.

"You sent me an encrypted text telling me you needed me to check in. The mind really is the first thing to go." Matt shook his head in mock sorrow.

"Didn't think you'd come by in person. Expected you to vid or something. I thought your mom said you'd be at home this week."

"Yeah, well she isn't totally up-to-date with my social calendar. I went to the beach to see Simon."

"Thought you guys broke up."

"We did, but we weren't really serious, anyway. He wanted me to meet his new boyfriend, so I came, I saw, I met, and I was underwhelmed."

"That why you're grumpy?"

"No." *Yes*.

"Ah." Lance just looked at him over the rim of his mug. He wanted details, but he had some weird idea that he wasn't a nosy old man, and wouldn't pry. So he liked to use silence instead.

Matt quirked an eyebrow at him.

Lance smiled back mildly, steaming coffee mug in one hand, other hand in his pocket. Rocking back and forth on his feet.

Matt debated waiting this out but decided he didn't have the patience. "There's nothing to tell. So, you got a job for me or what?"

Lance walked over and sat down at the kitchen table, planting his elbows. He looked apprehensive. "Yeah, I do, but it's not an easy one."

Matt shrugged. “Easy isn’t really my thing.”

“Like we haven’t known that since you were born?”

Matt ignored that. “So, c’mon, tell.”

“I got an encrypted file from Special Operations Unified Force last night. They want to contract for the extraction of a SOUF Lieutenant in Red Idaho. He was captured in Boulder, then identified as gay in POW camp. He’s out of re-education now, and SOUF wants him back.”

“’Kay, what’s the hard part?”

“He’s only been out of re-education for three weeks. He’s a level-one parolee.” So, he was tracked twenty-four hours a day via satellite by a dedicated Artificial Intelligence, not spot-checked.

“Seriously? That’s doable if we have our guy in Red Satellite Tracking build us an ID, but they can’t wait until he’s not being tracked in real time by AI anymore?” It was so much easier to work around the tracking chip of a level-two parolee being intermittently tracked by a computer. Computer tracking reports were only logged once every twenty-four hours.

“Nope. They want him back ASAP.”

“So why didn’t they go in after him when he was a POW or in re-education?” The military could get away with a rescue like that. Once he was no longer a military prisoner, it was an inexcusable act of aggression to send a military team in to rescue him, but contractors could get away with it. Or some political BS like that.

“They didn’t know where he was. His Blue chip was deactivated on the battlefield. If you take this job, you’re going in alone, Matt. It’s super down-low.”

“Okay.” Matt shrugged. He could do it. Infiltration was his specialty. Brute force? Not so much.

Just then Sid walked into the room, got a cup of coffee, and gave Matt a one-armed hug before sitting next to Lance with his coffee. “You guys talking business? Okay if I listen in?”

“Yeah.” Lance pretty much told Sid everything anyway. “Babe, can you hand me the tablet over there?” Lance pointed to the mini-comp on the other side of Sid. He brought up a file and projected it for Matt. “This is the file they sent me on the guy. Looks like they blacked out a lot of stuff, but the basics are there. You probably know him; he was a couple of years older than you and went to school in Weimer.”

“Probably? Lance, there were less than three hundred kids in the entire school system there. I definitely knew him.” He just couldn’t figure out who it might be. *Please, don’t let it be Steve*. Matt skimmed the usual military bullshit at the beginning of the file until he found the name.

“Oh holy fuck,” he muttered. Worse than Steve.

“What?”

“It’s James fucking Ayala!”

“That’s a weird middle name to saddle a kid with,” Sid said mildly.

Matt scowled at him. Smartass.

“Okay, so who’s James Ayala to you?”

“He’s a fucking homophobe, that’s who! He treated me like shit in high school for being gay.”

“Whadya mean, ‘like shit’?” Both grampas were instantly on alert. Their high school experiences had been so bad Matt felt like an idiot even bringing it up.

“Nothing, really. He just called me a fag and stuff.”

They blinked at him across the table. Fine, so he hadn’t been targeted for death by an organized bunch of

homophobic Junior New Coalition for Christians members during the Split Between the States like they had. Not everyone could live a life of glamour.

“Ooooh, that’s bad,” Grampa Sid said. As far as Matt could tell, he wasn’t mocking him.

“Calling someone a fag is *bad*?” Lance asked incredulously.

Sid huffed at him. “Yeah. No one uses the F-word anymore, Lance, unless they’re gay themselves. Then it’s okay. You’re asking Matt to go extract a fucking homophobe. Th’fuck, Lance?”

“He’s gay!” Lance defended.

“That’s what the Red Idaho Authority says. Doesn’t mean he *is*,” Matt pointed out.

“Lots of kids in the closet did stupid shit to protect themselves. The biggest homophobes are probably all homos,” Lance pointed out.

“Yeah, but he did it to our *grandson*, babe. If you’re in the closet and using it to insult someone else? Definite F-word violation. Definitely over the line.” Sid was almost rabidly protective of his family. “Besides, in this day and age, no one should be using the word if they’re in the closet, because there’s no excuse for *being* in the closet. Not in the Blue.”

Grampa Sid was a bit of a militant old fag too.

“So he was a confused kid in a small town. You know Matt was the only out kid in his school when he was there. Maybe Ayala was scared. Maybe his family was unsupportive. Maybe he’s sorry for using the word when he didn’t have the fag seal of approval.” Lance was pushing it now. Matt cringed a little.

Sid pulled out all the stops. He whipped out the “hurt” face. “Lance,” he said in a quavery voice, “are you *mocking*

me?” His big blue eyes looked wet, like he might even have tears in them.

Definitely over the top. Lance had to see through that.

“Oh, babe, you know I’m not mocking you!” Lance swallowed, because of course he was. “I’m sorry if it seemed like that. Here, let me get you some coffee.” He practically knocked over his chair getting up from the table.

“Hope you’re taking notes, boy,” Sid murmured to Matt once Lance was across the room.

Jesus, was it any wonder he was a smartass with role models like these? Yeah, he was taking notes: *Grampa Lance is gullible*.

Lance set Sid’s coffee down in front of him, running an apologetic hand across his back at the same time. He looked at Matt. “Listen, it’s a job. I can give it to someone else if you want. But we have to get him out or give the contract to a competitor. He may be gay, he may not, but someone’s gotta go in and save his sorry ass. Maybe being on the receiving end of their bullshit has made him more sympathetic if he isn’t gay.”

Sid suddenly broke out in a smile. “You know, even if he isn’t gay, *you’ll* be the one saving his sorry ass if you go, Matt.”

Matt stared at his Grampa. It would be nice to rub James’s face in it.…

“Besides, like Lance said, the closet cases are always the biggest homophobes.” Sid winked at him. “You never know—you could even get revenge sex out of this job.”

Lance cleared his throat. “You know, babe, I can’t really condone sex on the—”

“Kinda cosmic justice, don’t you think?” Sid cut Lance off as if he hadn’t said a word.

Matt thought about it a little. “Ah, shit.” He sighed, still not sure, but…. “Guess I’ll do it.” He was a dumbass.

Sid smiled and stood up. “Really need to get back on that board now. I’ve got a new client coming next month and I need to be up on this shit.” He looked down at Lance.

“We all right, babe?” Lance asked. He had on his “contrite” face.

Sid leaned over for a quick kiss. “Of course, Lance. Why wouldn’t we be?” Sid was wearing “innocence” now.

As soon as Sid was out of the room, Lance leaned across the table and said in a low voice, “You see how I handled the husband, Matt? I hope you’re taking notes.”

Freaks. Both of them.

The package. James was just the package. Admittedly, it was a term agents used when they couldn’t speak freely, but clients were sometimes called packages.

Matt sighed. Less than twenty-four hours ago he’d agreed to this extraction in the Grampas’ kitchen, and already he was regretting it. Not even the lure of revenge sex was very convincing anymore. He didn’t really want revenge sex. But he couldn’t back out, because he was disembarking the high-speed rail outside Ontario at the OR-ID border.

The truth was, he wanted the kind of sex he’d listened to Simon and his boyfriend having through the wall the other night. He didn’t think much of Simon’s boyfriend, but the way they were all gooey and lovey was… disturbing.

It wasn’t like Matt wanted a boyfriend—he was only twenty-three! He had years of being a dog ahead of him, if he followed his cousin Laslo’s example. It was just that

Simon and his boyfriend (th'fuck was his name again?) were, like, all *happy* and shit.

Being around a couple like that, it was hard *not* to want that gooey, warm-inside feeling. Even if he didn't *want it*, want it. Revenge sex sounded pretty cold after something like that.

Matt sighed again. He knew he wasn't going to have revenge sex, even if it was on tap (which he kinda doubted). He'd had a *thing* for James in high school. Like, a big old stiff thing. And somehow it would be just too lame for words to ruin that stupid crush he'd had with revenge sex seven years later.

Dumbass. Him. Really.

WHILE he was waiting to cross the border into Idaho, a group of RIA militia marched past Matt, assault-Directed Energy Weapons on their backs. Older tech, although from China. Still could do serious damage. He knew he looked disinterested, but inside he shivered.

He still wasn't familiar with their new uniforms. They looked… sinister. The Red had only just accepted they weren't the United States of old and had given up the traditional US military uniforms. Now the Red's unis were made of all-weather fabric, just like every other uni in the world, but they wore their body armor on the outside. That was the sinister-looking part. *Please don't let me meet up with those assholes or their buddies once I get the package.*

Matt fucking hated border crossings with forged documents. No matter how good the forgery was, there was always the chance his fake ID wouldn't hold up. Then they'd type his DNA and he'd really be fucked.

Or his secret tech pantry shielding would fail and they'd catch him with illegal military tech and then he'd still really be fucked. Really. He *hated* undercover border crossings.

He hated old buildings like this too. Ontario was one of the few places there had been actual fighting in Oregon during the Split Between the States. Washington and California had both gone Blue immediately, with few to no contested areas, just like Oregon. Nevada and Idaho were the only states bordering Oregon that had gone Red. There were no major towns on the OR-NV border. Ontario had been an Oregon municipality on the OR-ID border. Now it was a half-bombed-out wreck that belonged to Idaho.

The Red Idaho Authority Immigration Services building was northwest of Ontario, right off 84. It was made out of the recycled mix-crete typical of the mid-twenty-first century. Matt had seen some really nice buildings made with recycled masonry and mix-crete. The RIA Immigration Services building was not one of those.

It was built with pieces of bombed-out buildings and mix-crete mortar, with too few windows. On the other hand, it fit right into the whole immigration building oeuvre.

The bamboo-chip floor was yellowed, and the lighting was *fluorescent*, for God's sake. They could have used antique glass as masonry, mix-crete as mortar, and day-spectrum lighting. He'd seen that somewhere. It was kinda cool.

He was far enough forward in line to see the Immigration agents. Actual people, not AI. Labor was so cheap in Idaho it wasn't worth the investment in expensive foreign tech for the RIA. They still had the same comps he'd seen when he'd come through here last year. The datascreens sat on top of the desks instead of in them. They hadn't made comps like that since the twenty-first century.

Matt made it through Immigration, barely earning a glance. He breathed a sigh of relief. But it was always that way. It was the getting out with the package that seemed to be the problem.

—CHAPTER 2—

He was officially in the Red Idaho Authority, now. The people in the RIA never looked much different to him. Mostly just like poorer versions of the people he'd grown up around in eastern Oregon. Except for the very few who looked like much, much richer versions of the people he'd grown up around.

But they sure as hell *acted* differently. He'd been accosted by people wanting to earn enough (or steal enough) to make it through another day the second he stepped outside the Immigration building. Kids wanting spare bills (reminding him he was in Idaho where people actually carried money, and he might want to find a teller-bot). Rough-looking guys wanting to be his guide (for what didn't matter, because they just wanted to guide him to a back alley and take his cash, paycards, and any other valuables he might have). Women wanting to do him for money. Boys wanting to suck his cock. Older people with holo-cards to sell. Whatever. He'd been through it so many times in so many Red states he didn't even notice anymore.

Well, except for the boys with the long eyelashes and puffy lips who wanted to suck his cock. He noticed them.

Once through the gauntlet, Matt got a nutrition bar and cup of coffee at a kiosk. Jesus, he needed to start mainlining caffeine.

After paying with his hookup, Matt had to send the receipt to SpecOps Accounting. It was truly fucked that

even on a covert operation he had to keep track of his spending in real time or QESA wouldn't get reimbursed. The transmission was encrypted, of course, and he was set up to bounce off Red satellites to a "legitimate" business in California, but still.

Covert, his ass.

He found a seat at a bench nearby. It wasn't a particularly pleasant place to sit, but most of Ontario wasn't. They'd barely rebuilt after the battles here fifty years before. Red states were all the same.

A guy came along, breaking into Matt's distraction. "Anyone sittin' here?"

Matt gave him a quick once-over. Not the happy, gay kinda once-over. The "I'm a covert agent from the Blue" once-over.

Camo all-weathers, kinda outta shape, long hair, mid-fifties. Not military: everyone wore all-weathers, even civilians. You could wear all-weathers for weeks without them showing dirt or smelling (much). What was not to like? Idaho was a hunter's paradise so camo wasn't unusual. Probably wanted money. Matt decided he was harmless. "Nah. Go 'head."

"Ya here for the huntin'?"

"Pretty much," Matt said agreeably.

"Yeah, not so good the last few years. Back when they used to stock deer 'n' antelope, now that was some huntin'. Why, my Granddaddy—"

Oh, fuck me. A talker. Matt groaned. Audibly. Wasn't like the guy was listening to him. After a half-hour treatise on how much better the hunting was in Idaho before either of them existed ("…and I don't give a good goddamn what them Blue liberals say, it ain't global warming! 'S'a conspiracy. Plain's the nose on my face!") Matt managed to fake a very important text.

As he answered, he picked up his pack, gave the guy a nonchalant wave, and took off to rent a crotch rocket. An environmentally harmless *electric* crotch rocket.

MATT made camp just outside of Payette that night. He easily could have made it to Boise just after dark, but he wanted time to think. And he liked camping. He even built himself a campfire. Completely unnecessary, and not that smart since it wasn't quite the rainy season yet, but what the hell? He was feeling maudlin. It added ambience.

Apparently too much ambience. He barely had a decent fire going before another packer came along on the trail Matt had been following. It was deep dusk now, and most travelers had stopped for the night already, whether in one of the camping shelters or beside the trail like Matt had. When the guy stopped and asked Matt, "Feel like some company tonight?" Matt almost would have thought it was a pickup. Except no one who wanted to live long as a free queer would be that obvious in the Red. This guy must be just that naive.

"No," he said shortly, and gave the guy an unblinking stare until he moved on. It was only as he was walking away, and Matt was checking out his ass—hey, he was a good looking-guy—that Matt saw the gray handkerchief peeking out of the guy's pocket.

It was even 18% gray. At least it looked that way in the fading light. Most queers in the Red just settled for any old medium-gray square of cloth. But 18% gray had double meaning. The use of gray or grayscale handkerchiefs was to show someone was queer but living under the oppression of the Confederated Red States. The anti-rainbow flag.

Eighteen percent was a common background color for art stills, but in this case it had been co-opted to represent

the 18% of all “gay” gene carriers who *weren’t* queers. Because that’s how most queers who lived in the Red had to live. Like the other 18%.

Matt always found the use of the 18% flag funny. Not even all gay men could tell the difference between 18% gray and any other medium gray. He always figured it was only the queerest of the queer who could. Survival of the queerest. Something like that.

Matt almost called the guy back, but he really wanted to be alone tonight. The guy would be all right. He was headed in the right direction, anyway—toward Oregon. If he was smart, that’s where he was going. And he’d be more careful with the pickups. It wasn’t like the grayscale flag was some kind of state secret.

He spent the time next to the campfire thinking over the extraction.

First Lieutenant James Ayala was captured by RIA troops during the Fall of Boulder in July. Boise’s very active Blue cell was probably what James had to thank for this rescue. He was barely out of re-education camp. A level-one parolee, tracked by AI in real time. Matt was going to have to do some fancy chip recoding to extract James, which meant he had to carry a recoder, along with all his other illegal tech.

Thank God for that hollow leg. Or rather, the landmine that led to the hollow leg.

WHEN Matt got up at the ass crack of dawn (he may be some kinda special agent, but he still liked to sleep in), he wasn’t feeling particularly grateful for the hollow leg. Or the landmine. Mornings like this, his thigh ached. It may look like a regular leg and act like a regular leg, but it didn’t fucking *feel* like a regular leg. So he opened an

instant-hot coffee pouch and tried to be thankful that he'd stepped on an old-tech mine, and not an atomizer mine. He couldn't be thankful for the shitty coffee.

It wasn't until his second cup of coffee—and the NSAID kicked in—that he could work up to not being un-thankful. His fucking thigh still throbbed a little. He looked at his timepiece, and opened up the damn leg to get his vid hookup. A regular hookup was fine in Idaho, but the vid model wasn't available to regular civilians in the Red, yet. So it meant another gadget in his fake leg. He was a walking tech pantry.

It would be really cool if he could just have a Brain-link feed the com directly into his neural network, but with tech like that he may as well have "Blue undercover agent: shoot at will" lased on his forehead. Besides, they hadn't worked out the vid feed for that, yet. Too disorienting.

Andry was on vid when he called in.

"Where th'fuck are you?" Andry scowled.

"What the hell are you doing there? Let me talk to Lance." Shit. *Andry* was the new trainee?

Andry's scowl morphed into a smirk. "Gramps's eating breakfast and he told me to only get him if you were having problems."

"Is he letting you check in the other agents, or just me?"

Now the smirk became a sulky lip. "Just you. I'm training on your ass."

"Fine. Tell your 'boss' I'm a half hour out of Boise by crotch rocket and hoping to be back out tonight. I won't check in again until tomorrow morning."

"Why not tonight?"

"'N'case I don't make it out tonight. Might have to stay overnight depending on the sitch with the package."

Andry rolled his eyes. “You mean James?”

“Yeah, James.”

“What is your problem with James Ayala?” Before Matt could answer, he heard Andry mutter “Sorry” to someone off-vid and then he turned back to the monitor. “Okay, I have you checked in at 0724 with no check-in until tomorrow at 0730.” Then Andry ended the transmission.

“I don’t have a problem with James Ayala,” Matt told the blank vid screen. And his stupid fucking little brother. Then he smirked a little. Lance probably got all over Andry’s ass for non-essential communications on an encrypted transmission.

Fine. He was going to see James Ayala, help him get the hell out of Idaho, laugh in his face, and then never see him again. It was seven years ago, and a lifetime in experience. And he was over it. Except for that revenge thing. Laughing in his face should take care of that, right?

James had picked up his tail. It was disconcerting, since Matt thought he was pretty good at remaining undetected normally. He’d been trained by those relatives in Special Ops. He shouldn’t be that easy to pick out. He must be concentrating too much on the James of the past and not on the one right in front of him. He came around a corner and realized he’d lost James. *Fuck*.

Matt cleared the block, including an alley. When he first looked down it, he’d been surprised to see a Dumpster. He hadn’t known you could get someone to service them. No one could fit inside a Sorpacter, but clearly someone could fit inside or behind a Dumpster.

When he checked it out, he found nothing. Except a really bad smell, which was now clinging to him even with the all-weathers he wore. Nice.

James had to be long gone by now. Matt would have to stake out his house. He looked around the corner at the end of the block just in case.

Bingo. The façade of a building partway down the cross street was being deconstructed, although there weren't any workers around at the moment. There was equipment, scaffolding, even some debris strewn about. He bet James was there, and since it was deserted it was a good place to approach him. James might recognize him, and Matt couldn't predict his reaction. It would be better without witnesses. A familiar reaction could cause problems when a guy was wearing the pink triangle. Even if "familiar" translated to "fistfight." It could be reported and linked to James.

In front of the deconstruction zone sat a construction-sized Sorpacter. It was attached by a sorting chute up the scaffolding, with openings about every three meters so stuff could be dropped in. He didn't think anyone could fit inside the unit, but he checked to be sure. The sorting bot inside slammed the cover in his face. Nothing.

Matt turned back toward the scaffolding. He was looking left, so he didn't see James climb out of the sorting chute. He did manage to catch movement out of the corner of his eye right before 85 kilos of man hit him from 2.5 meters above him.

Not the way he usually preferred to be jumped by a guy. "Fuck, James!" he sputtered, his cheek mashed into the rough sidewalk. He could feel James freeze when Matt said his name. He had Matt's arms twisted into some impossible configuration by then.

"Th'fuck?" muttered James, letting up on Matt's arms a little. Thank God.

"Get off me, you fucking idiot!" Matt hissed. "If anyone sees you lying on another man on the street, you're going

back into re-education."

"You were following me," James pointed out calmly, not moving.

"Yeah, so I could talk to you. I'm not trying to *do* anything to you! Would I have been so obviously following you if I wanted to fuck with you?" Okay, so Matt hadn't known he was so obviously following, but he'd use what he had. "C'mon, James. Seriously, you need to get off me before someone sees."

James got up, but Matt could feel him standing very still back there in defensive—or offensive—readiness. Matt rolled over and looked up at James a few seconds before standing.

James stared at him stonily, ready for anything as Matt dragged his sore ass off the concrete. He really would have preferred a plastic composite walkway. Idaho seemed a little short on modern updates, though.

Matt could clearly see the pink triangle on the front of James's shirt. Yeah, it would be obvious to anyone that this guy just got out of re-education.

"Th'fuck?" James asked again, the look on his face changing from stony to confused. "Matt?"

TEN minutes later, they were walking down the street together, each holding a coffee pouch. James had that completely blank expression he was so good at.

"What are you doing here? You need to get th'fuck out of the Red, Matt."

"I'm gonna go." Matt kept his voice just as low. "As soon as you're ready."

James said nothing for half a block, just stared straight ahead. "*You're* rescuing *me*?" He whispered incredulously.

Matt imagined his smirk bore a striking resemblance to Andry's from that morning. "Yup," he said cheerfully.

"I don't need you to rescue me." James's tone was flat.

"Then why haven't you left yet? You've been out of the camp three weeks."

"How do you know that?"

"Sorry; that's classified info." Matt was just goading him, now.

James snorted. "I have clearances you've never heard of."

Matt got serious. "Yeah, I'm thinking my file on you was incomplete. You aren't a SOUF Regular or a Ranger, are you?"

"Your *file* on me? Who the hell are you with?"

"You show me yours, I'll show you mine."

"Fine. I'm Psi-force." Matt took a small misstep. Psi-force was one of the most secretive and legendary branches of SpecOps, formed from the Blue remnants of Rangers PSYOPS after Fort Bragg and Camp LeJeune went Red in the '50s. When the Blue states military reorganized in 2057, the Marines and all Special Operating Forces formed their own branch of the military—Special Operations Unified Force. Psi-force was one of the units that ultimately fell under the jurisdiction of both SOUF Command and the ArmySF Subcommand. Psi-force troops could be embedded with any military unit.

"Your turn." James nudged him.

Matt stopped walking and turned to James. Let the fucker face this one head-on. "I'm an extraction agent for Queer Extraction Services Association."

James gave another little snort, and stared for a second. "I'm being rescued by a *contractor*," he muttered to himself.

Matt smirked again. They turned and continued on.

“You have a licensed recoder?” James asked in a low voice.

“Yeah.” Matt smirked a little more. It wasn’t like they let just *anybody* walk around with a recoder. James needed him for that if nothing else.

“Guess that’s all right, then. Thank God.”

—CHAPTER 3—

SINCE James was being tracked so closely, Matt took him to a temporary safe house. It was a meeting room at the Boise Fire Department. Matt waited for the secretary to finish sweeping before they went in.

"Would you like coffee? Do you need any tech?" She offered on her way out. A subtle nod gave Matt his answer. There must be listening devices in the hallway.

"Yeah, my tablet's malfunctioning. I'll wipe it when we're done."

"Right away." She smiled pleasantly and left.

James arched a brow at him when he turned into the room and shut the door. "She swept it," Matt told him. "We can talk."

"You trust her?" He seemed more curious than concerned.

"Yeah." Matt knew her pretty well.

James pulled out a chair and collapsed into it. He rested his elbows on the table, put his head in his hands, and groaned. He stayed that way for a long time. The secretary came back with the tablet and left again. Matt sat down not quite directly across from James.

The tablet held intel from the Boise Blue cell. He downloaded the encrypted info from the tablet into his regular hookup and sent it on to QESA through a Red

satellite, re-encrypting it first. Matt checked on James again.

His hands were fisted in his hair, and Matt could see his knuckles had turned white.

“James,” Matt said softly. He may not like the guy much, but this looked like some serious reaction. At least for James. “I’ve done this tons of times. We’ll get out.” Probably wasn’t a good time to mention he’d done it mostly as part of a team, with less surveillance on the package.

“How old are you now, Matt?”

“Twenty-three. Almost twenty-four.” He felt stupid tacking on the “almost,” but couldn’t stop himself.

One of those snorts from James. “How many times’ve you done this?”

“I’ve done seventeen extractions bringing people out of the Red.” People always asked, so he kept track. If you were trying to escape you put a lot of trust in the people helping you. The consequences for getting caught were too high.

“Yeah, seventeen. That’s good,” James said somewhat absently. “Listen, if we’re going to escape there’s something you need to know.”

“That’s usually my line.”

“Yeah, I’m sure it is. You need to know this, though. In re-education camp they did something to my head.” Then he paused for so long Matt thought he might be finished.

“Um, shaved it?” Not that it looked like it had been recently. It was long enough that James had some curl in his honey-gold hair. Those curls would just wrap around his finger.

“No, the Blue did that,” James said, deadpan. Finally he looked up. James looked clear-eyed, if a little tense.

“Actually, the Blue did other shit that I think led to this. But re-education fucked up my head. I’m not always… right, I guess.”

Matt gently touched James’s hand. “No one can be right all the time.”

“Smartass.” James finally showed some emotion, one corner of his mouth quirking up. “I mean, my head just… works differently.”

Completely confusing. “Huh?”

“Ah, fuck,” James muttered. Then he stared at the wall across from him for a minute. “Okay, I’m going to tell you some stuff that’s need-to-know. Actually, I think it’s not even supposed to be need-to-know, but I’m not sure I care anymore.”

“Goody. I love being embroiled in conspiracy.” Not.

James shot him an annoyed look, and changed the subject suddenly. “How’re you going to recode me without my tracker picking it up?”

“I have a dummy. We can do it almost anywhere, but we should do it at your house so they don’t come looking for you as soon. It’ll look strange if you sit in a café all day, but they might buy you sleeping twelve hours.”

“What about the trackers in my clothes?”

Matt stared blankly. “They track your clothes?” Was that standard?

“This pink triangle isn’t just a fashion statement, you know.” James’s lips quirked up on both ends. It was cute. No, not cute. It was, um, strange. Unique. *Shit*.

“Shit,” Matt echoed his internal dialogue. “We have to cover that up too. It’s not going to be safe for you—or me—if I’m seen in public with you much. If they type me we’re both fucked.”

“You have the gene too, huh?”

Whoa. Looked more likely James was gay. If he had the “gay” gene he had about an eighty-two percent chance of being on the queer spectrum. Scientists hadn’t isolated other genes in play, but there had to be at least one or two. But the “gay” gene was taken by Red states as proof positive that someone needed re-education.

How they caught the other thirty-five percent of homosexuals that didn’t have the gene was by good, old-fashioned finger-pointing.

“That how they get you?”

James nodded. “One of the guards thought I hung out with another POW too much, and sent us both for typing. The other guy didn’t have the gene, so he’s just in regular POW hell. Not enough guards to testify against him.” For anyone who didn’t have the gene, it took three “witnesses” to testify that they knew someone was queer for the charge to stick.

Matt tried to keep himself from asking, but he’d never been that great at impulse control. “So, was he?”

“Yeah, he was. And yeah, I know because we were fucking around.” James looked him in the eye. Matt tried to decipher what this meant. Was James daring him to say something? Or was he facing up to something from their shared past? Fuck, who knew?

“All right, listen. This was my original plan, so let’s start there. I was hoping we could leave tonight, so the plan was I’d come over after nightfall, we’d activate the dummy and switch off your chip simultaneously. Then we’d have twelve hours to recode your chip before turning it on, showing you as a level-two parolee. We have a Blue agent in Colorado who works in Red Satellite Tracking. He creates false identities and tracking codes, reprograms the AI if possible. He’ll run interference when he can.”

Matt’s Blue chip could truly be turned off, undetectable by Red tech. But Red chips had trace radiation so it could always be detected, even if off. Anyone with a chip in a Red state was either Blue, Red militia, or a criminal. Like someone who was queer.

“Then we get the hell out of Boise and we should make it through Ontario within three days.”

“Three days? What, are we walking?”

Matt took pleasure in smiling really big and telling him, “Why yes, we are.”

One kind of nice thing about the Red was the number of people who couldn’t afford transportation other than foot-power. Or the occasional horse, but they were expensive too.

It was much easier to hide when you were on foot. The extractee and his extractor had to get out on their own, and Matt had learned through experience that walking was the lowest-profile form of transportation. “We’ll get picked up by a Feng Niao bird in Baker. Or Forward Operating Base Joseph if we have to take the second backup route.”

After a flicker of surprise, James just nodded. “Guess they can’t send the military in for me, huh?”

“Violation of Four Corners Agreement.” SOUFCOM could have sent a team in for him when he was still being detained, but not once he was “free.” Inside the Red states, the only way out of a detainment camp was through an oath of fealty and a real-time tracking device. Fortunately, oaths given under duress were considered invalid in the Blue. If Blue military personnel took the oath and got out, the military had to contract with QESA or another NGO to extract their soldier, but couldn’t do it themselves. That was an act of aggression, and against the Four Corners Agreement.

Tracking devices were tricky. Contracts to extract someone wearing a level-one tracking device were almost never issued. Nearly everyone had to wait the two years for the switch to a level-two device. So if an extraction agent was sent in after a guy like James, the Blue wanted him badly.

“What about your Brain-link?” If James had one, and he most likely did since he was an officer, they might be able to reactivate it, which would make all their com easier.

“Don’t have one. In Psi-force only com specialists do.”

Matt blinked. That was kind of weird. Most SF officers and non-coms had them. “Won’t really make a lot of difference; half the time I can’t turn them back on anyway.” The tech of implanting a com device in someone’s brain was tricky and delicate. And largely beyond Matt’s understanding.

James nodded, leaned back, and crossed his arms, tipping his chair back and looking thoughtful. And relaxed. Matt could tell by his twitching jaw muscle he was anything but.

“Our first backup is to head to Payette and walk across the Highway 52 bridge with our fake IDs. Our second backup is to grab a couple of bikes waiting for us in a barn outside of Weiser. We ‘steal’ those and ride like hell for the Snake River, then up Hells Canyon to the Hells Canyon Dam.”

“That’s pretty far north.”

“More safe spots, though, and sort of defies logic. Like, we should be getting out of the state as fast as we can, but instead we take forever. Creates circles of confusion.” Matt waved his spread fingers around.

“You’ve got this all planned out. Done it a few times?”

“Come out of Idaho with a similar plan five times.” Just never had to go through Hells Canyon. Matt held his breath, hoping James wouldn’t ask.

“Ever gone through Hells Canyon?”

Dammit. “No, never had to use that backup. We have a pretty extensive network of safe houses.” Matt sighed and admitted, “Which we can’t use, because you’ll have a live chip.”

“What do you normally do?”

“We bring out people who are already level-two parolees, and turn off their chip, leave a dummy somewhere they could conceivably be for a while. Camping or something. Then we walk really fast and avoid the militias. Sometimes we bring people out who haven’t been ID’d as queer by the Red, yet. That’s pretty easy.”

James gave him a long, unreadable look. Finally he said, “It’s not going to be that easy to get me out.”

“You sound very sure of that.” Which probably meant James had good reason to. He didn’t seem like much of an alarmist. And based on the little Matt could remember of James, he’d always been calm and level-headed.

Matt could remember when he was about fourteen, going out to fight a big grass fire, spending a day digging fire line with other teenagers from Weimer. Late in the day, they got trapped when the wind shifted and the fire changed direction.

They’d all been trained since birth on what to do, but only James had the calm to get everyone coordinated to set a big back-burn surrounding them, then get everyone down in their fire shelters to wait it out.

Matt had been dripping with sweat, but ice cold inside. Covered in soot, with goose bumps and chills sweeping over him. The tinfoil fire shelter that had been in his family

for fifty years arched over his head, hooked under his thumbs by the corner straps. His heartbeat was echoing around inside it, or maybe that was just in his head. Matt was so scared he was sure he was going to puke all over the shallow depression he'd scraped into the sod before he could lie down in it.

He'd felt a hand on his shoulder, and looked up from under the edge of the shelter into James's face. "Lie down." That was the first thing he could remember James ever saying to him.

So Matt lay down, and the fire burned around their back-burn and never got close to them.

Matt pushed the memory away and refocused.

James ran a hand across his jaw, rasping his stubble. He must not have a sonic razor here. Then his hand traveled up through his hair, absently yanking on it. He blew out a big breath, puffing his cheeks out. Matt didn't need a psychology degree to read James's body language. He didn't want—or didn't know how—to tell him something.

"So, you know what Psi-force does, right?"

It took Matt a second. "Psychological warfare, right? Confusing the enemy, luring them into situations where we have the advantage, hearts and minds, stuff like that."

"Yeah, we do stuff like that. What I do more is predict enemy behavior. Individual and group behavior."

He seemed to need an acknowledgment. Matt nodded. "Uh-huh."

"Yeah, so mostly we deploy with other SF as requested, maybe one to three of us per battalion, and we predict the way the firefight might go, and how best to end it fast. And usually we fight alongside everyone else while we do it.

"But it's the fucking military, and somebody did some research somewhere and a bunch of someones came up

with a plan to turn soldiers into a new kinda weapon. How unusual, huh?" James rolled his eyes and gave a disgusted—and kind of unhappy—snort. "And so they experimented on some Psi-Force troops. I don't know how many. But of course they didn't give *them* any choice in the matter. Just implanted something in their heads. And then they sent the altered Psi-force troopers out with bio-rhythm trackers and built-in uplinks implanted in them and started conducting their real-world experiments."

Matt groaned. "So you're telling me…." He made the "go on" motion with his hand.

"I'm telling you I'm one of the Blue's guinea pigs. And the Red had to have found the extra tracking info on me when they disabled my chip. They know there's something different about me."

"How much do they know?" And what was there to know?

"The RIA knows I have tech implanted they'd like to figure out. I don't know if they're keeping that to themselves, or if they've let the whole Confederation of Red States in on it."

"Jesus Howard Christ." Matt groaned at the ceiling. "I thought this was going to be easier than normal since you're SOUF. Fuck. I'd rather bring that lesbian couple with the two toddlers out of Utah again."

"So would I." James cracked half a smile. It *was* kinda cute, the way he could quirk up just one side of his mouth like that. And the golden stubble was kinda sexy. Matt sighed and shook his head.

"So, are you going to tell me what this implant does?"

"Sorta gave me a sixth sense, I guess." James's voice was flat, and his face was extra blank. "It's like there's another sensory organ hooked up to my brain. I can

decipher emotional states and intent. Like an empath plus some. I know when someone is deceiving us to lure us into an ambush. Or when someone's remembering what an asshole I was in high school."

"But I wasn't," Matt said, lamely, after a moment of silence. That was all he had.

"Yeah, but I was." James cleared his throat. "Sorry," he added gruffly. "For being a dick about finding you, you know. With Steve."

Matt stared. He had to deal with the news that James had some kind of implanted ESP, *and* his apology? He decided to deal with the easier issue first.

"You can't really read someone's mind, though, right? That's what you said. You only pick up their intent?" It wasn't like the idea of implanted ESP was unheard of. Gramma Anais had been talking about it for years. And they could hook up com equipment directly to your brain, now.

"Yeah. But by knowing someone's intent and emotional state, I can usually make an educated guess about what they're thinking."

"You just woke up from brain surgery an empath? Didn't that fuck with your head?"

Another disgusted snort. "Oh, yeah. I almost went insane at first. Took me months to get used to it. It was like I had an exposed nerve and everyone nearby was jumping on it. After a while I learned to ignore it. Like being in a crowded room and everyone's talking, but you don't listen unless you pay attention.

"I had to be sort of… tuned, I guess. If I worked with the same guys for a while, I knew who was feeling what, but there was this process I went through to 'introduce' them to my implant. So I'd know them. God, this makes no fucking sense, does it?"

“Yeah, it does. If you ran into someone you didn’t know when you were surrounded by guys you did, you knew what their intentions were?” James nodded. “But when you were thrown into a situation where you were around all new guys, you were lost?”

James looked thoughtful. “People’s brain waves can be just as distinctive as their voice. So I could actually get to know someone pretty fast, because the waves are directional. Like, if I knew someone was feeling ‘annoyed’, I also knew it came from that corner of the room. And then once I was familiar with their ‘voice’, I could ID that person.”

“How did that work in prison camp?”

“Same.” James paused. “I was part of a Ranger platoon when I was captured, and they separated us once we were detained.” James cleared his throat. “I met my, um, ‘friend’ in POW camp. He was AirSF.”

Matt’s timepiece chimed suddenly, breaking his intense concentration on James. He didn’t want to know about James’s lover, anyway. “We have five minutes. Listen, just tell me this. Is this what got fucked up in re-education? Your ability to sense people’s emotions and intentions?” James gave a sharp nod. “So, how fucked up are you?”

“My range and ability got more acute. When I’m outside, any guy walking down the street even two blocks ahead might be feeling or intending anything I pick up, and I don’t know where it’s coming from without more info. I’m pretty sure it’s line of sight. Solid masses seem to block reception.”

“And they didn’t before?”

“I think they did, but range did, also. Like, I might see a guy a hundred yards away, but I couldn’t pick him up. Now I can.”

“Fuck,” Matt sighed. “And you want out of here, right? I’m not fucking with some secret mission by being here?” Although that was unlikely, since they’d been contracted by SpecOps HQ to get James out. ArmySF SubCom and SOUFCOM should have both signed off on the contract, first. Unless they had one of their famous miscommunications.

“I want the fuck out of here. But there’s another consideration: someone comes and checks on me from the RIA daily.”

“This just keeps getting better. So what time do they check on you?”

“It’s a surprise, usually. Sometimes someone comes to the door, sometimes a guy talks to me at the coffee kiosk, once I got a vid com. I think we should wait until right after my next check and take off. I think we should go through Hells Canyon, and I think you should turn off my chip altogether.”

“It’ll take longer, increase the risk for both of us and our operative in Colorado.”

“Militia patrols are a huge risk, my face could be all over the militia band within minutes of discovering me gone. And parts of Hells Canyon might be rugged enough to block the tracking satellites. They aren’t going to write me off as another Enforced Emigrant, Matt.”

It was true, and Matt knew it. The entire point of his career was to ensure the Enforced Emigration law worked —a law his great-great-grandfather Aaron McEvoy authored and shepherded through the new Blue States of America Congress in 2058.

QESA was the first and largest military contractor that sent agents in to extract moral refugees in the Red. Most people had to petition through the Blue underground for assisted extraction before the BSA Federal Court would

approve the mission, but members of the military were different. Since James was no longer in a POW or re-education camp, he had to be extracted by QESA or get out on his own. But the BSA could still contract for his extraction without a Federal Court order since he was military.

“You really want out of here, huh?”

“It’s changing, Matt.” James stared off into space, rasping his cheek with his hand again.

God, he could be confusing as hell. “James! Snap out of it. What’s changing?”

“The implant. It didn’t just change when they started exposing me to their re-education and stabilization. It keeps changing.

“You’re good at remaining unnoticed, Matt. I knew you were tailing me because I could feel you back there.”

“I thought you said that was normal—”

“It’s not normal for me to know you were directing that intent at *me*. You could have been tailing anyone. Little things like that have been developing regularly. I don’t know what th’fuck this thing in my head is, or what it’s gonna do to me in the end. I want to go back and get the fucking thing out.”

“Gah!” Matt was reaching new levels of frustration. “Okay, we have to move. Go home, pack, and as soon as you’re contacted, signal me visually. What’s a good signal I could see from a hiding spot?”

“I live in an older part of town, one of those multi-use building areas. In the brick-and-mortar across the street behind it there’s an empty storeroom on the third floor, northeast corner. You should be able to get in from the roof —I’ve done it. Scale the drainage system on the building to the north and climb over the shared wall. When I’ve been

contacted, I'll turn on the light in the third window from the southeast side of my place."

"Been planning ahead?"

"Wouldn't you have every escape possibility mapped out?"

"Hell, yes. Okay, you go and I'll be about thirty minutes behind you. I have to make another quick contact."

"I assume my address was in my file?" Matt nodded. James stared at him a second before standing up. "Thanks, Matt," he said quietly, tapping his knuckles on the table. Then he walked out.

Oh, this was going to fucking suck balls.

—CHAPTER 4—

JAMES had known they couldn't leave him here. He'd known someone would be coming, and even that it might be a contractor. The legalities around Enforced Emigration weren't clear to him and he wasn't sure they could send a team after him. But Matt Tennimore? He never saw *that* one coming.

It wasn't like he held a grudge against Matt. He'd been the dick, there. He was so grateful he wouldn't have cared, anyway. He just wanted out.

He'd been starting to get more sensitive to the implant. There were times he felt he could barely keep his brain in his head. In crowds, he could *feel* the intentions of other people pressing in on him so strongly it felt like his head might collapse. He avoided crowds when possible, but the job he'd been assigned as a re-educated former POW made it impossible. James was doing crowd control at religious rallies, of all things.

He didn't have to work that much, fortunately. Maybe three or four events—fewer than twenty hours a week. He didn't know what was with the light workload, but he'd take it. He'd thought that Red states liked to make their moral criminals make retribution to society through hard labor. Not in his case apparently. Busting up big rocks into little rocks did not appear to be in his future.

Maybe the RIA knew he was cracking up.

Or they wanted to coddle him, bring him over to the Dark Side. Which could also explain the cushy living situation. No one fresh out of queer re-education got a roommate: couldn't give them a same-sex roommate in case they "slipped"; couldn't give them one of the opposite sex in case the re-education actually worked. Fornication was as illegal between hets as homos, after all.

But did other parolees get a two-bedroom apartment in a halfway decent part of the city? It was a neighborhood from around the beginning of the millennium, not too run-down like most of the former middle-class neighborhoods. It had lots of brick-and-mortars in the area. Wealthy women from the hills above town came on weekends in their hydrogen sportsmobiles and *shopped* there, for God's sake.

The only thing he'd miss about this pit was his apartment.

Okay, there was one other thing he would miss. He was walking right past Basha's, so he stopped to order a chicken shawarma to go. May as well get the good stuff while he could.

Almira, Basha's granddaughter, chatted with him a minute since there weren't any other customers. Aside from the food, he liked Basha's because the family didn't care about the pink triangle on his chest. Most people looked right through him unless he forced them to pay attention. It made his job in crowd control a mite difficult at times.

James made it to his front door by 1725 with his takeout bag in hand. There was a pizza delivery bike out front, and a guy waiting on his doorstep with the standard flat box. He knew from half a block away that the guy was an RIA agent of some kind. A nervous one, full of bravado.

James stopped halfway up his walk and hooked a thumb in his waistband. "Musta forgot all about the pizza I

ordered.” The guy just looked at him. James sighed and came to the door, pressing his thumb to the reader, disengaging the lock. He wondered why they didn’t wait inside for him. He knew they could get in without his thumbprint. He could feel the guy’s impatience while he unlocked the door, like he thought it was a useless gesture.

He waved the silent “delivery” guy inside, then followed him in. “Is there even anything in the box?”

“No,” the guy said. He looked at James and waited. James smiled. He could play this game better than this yahoo. He stared, unblinking, until the guy began to fidget.

“You’re supposed to be in for the evening at 1730,” he finally blurted.

“Right now, it’s,” James checked his timepiece, “1727.”

“Cutting it close, weren’t you?”

James stared some more. The guy fidgeted a little then made a visible effort to still himself. Or maybe it was a mental effort. Sometimes James couldn’t differentiate what sensory info he was picking up anymore. “I’m here to take your report.”

“First day on the job?” *Yes*. He could practically hear it.

The guy flushed. “Second,” he said, seeming to recognize the futility of bluffing. Much. “I’ll be your regular liaison for a while. You’ve been assigned a new caseworker. You need to report to her office by 0845 tomorrow morning, address in your hookup under ‘Caseworker’.”

James blinked. “Is that normal?”

“I’ve given you all the information I’m allowed. Just report to her in the morning,” the liaison snapped. He started for the door, wanting out.

“What’s your name?” James asked. He didn’t care, but he’d bet the guy wasn’t supposed to share info like that with him. He tried something he’d been working on and gave the guy a little mental push.

“Joel,” the guy responded. Then he froze mid-step. “Shit,” he said under his breath, and without looking at James, he slammed the door and left, more scared than angry.

James snorted softly. Now to decide whether it was better to wait until 0845 tomorrow or leave tonight. He went to snap on the light in the spare bedroom, then to pack.

IT WAS barely dusk when there was a knock on the door. James opened it to find Matt in a Basha’s Restaurant shirt.

“Good evening, sir,” Matt’s voice was all calm professionalism. His face was all smirk and mischievous glint. James’s gut tightened in reaction to seeing him, just as it had this afternoon, when he had landed on Matt with that flying (literally) tackle. He didn’t get enough full-body contact with attractive men lately. “It appears you left your hat when you stopped by our establishment this afternoon.”

James stopped cataloguing all the changes Matt had undergone—he wasn’t exactly baby-faced anymore, but he was still punch-in-the-gut attractive—and glanced down at Matt’s empty hands. He raised an eyebrow, looking back up. Matt gave him a minuscule “it’s your line” kind of gesture.

“Uh, no. That doesn’t look like any hat I’ve ever seen.”

Matt rolled his eyes. “Yes, sir, sorry for the misunderstanding. Almira thought it looked like one you

had worn and asked me to stop by." He smiled like he'd done something especially clever.

James gave Matt the two-handed "now what?" shrug. Matt continued. "Lovely evening, isn't it?"

"Uh, yeah. Sure." Belatedly, James realized he couldn't get a feel for where Matt was going with this. He couldn't get a mental read on him at all.

"Exactly the kind of evening I like to be at home, sitting in my yard. With a beer."

Matt stressed "beer" just a bit. James rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well I hope you get the chance for that, later. Bye." He said a touch gleefully, shutting the door in Matt's face. He made his own smirky face while he gave Matt time to go down the walkway and onto the street before walking to his cool-cabinet and grabbing a couple pouches of beer.

Out the back door, James had his own little yard and tiny patio. It was walled on both sides, with a shorter fence facing the brick-and-mortar across the road. Between the walls and the small pine tree, he had a yard that could only be surveilled from a few spots. He knew them all and checked them out visually. No sign of mobile surveillance, either. Flying micro-bugs were nearly unheard of in Idaho. He pulled a chair behind the pine, next to the fence, and pulled the tab on his beer.

Within a couple of minutes, he saw a guy in dirty safety-yellow all-weathers and a black old-fashioned ball cap plodding down the street toward him. He knew it was Matt, but he looked nothing like the Basha's delivery guy who'd been at James's door ten minutes earlier. His dirty-blond hair was hidden under the hat. More importantly, Matt moved differently now. As the delivery guy, he'd been quick, efficient, and professional—almost geeky—but this construction worker was dead-tired after a long day, barely

picking his feet up off the ground. He even had a little hitch in his gait.

In spite of the glibness of his approach, James had to hand it to Matt. He seemed good at his job. So far. He'd always thought Matt might end up at SOUF, since half his family had, but QESA must be working out for him all right.

James picked up the other beer from the ground and handed it to Matt as he drew up to the fence. "Nice pants."

"You like 'em? I'm just borrowing 'em. Can we talk here?"

"Yeah, I think I've swept it well enough. Within about one meter of this spot, we're back in their range."

"No vid?" Matt looked a little surprised.

James smirked. "They appear not to have that kind of budget." A lot of things that the Blue could afford the RIA and other Red states couldn't. There was almost no resource sharing in the Confederated Red States. Only some military entities and trade boards were nationalized under the Confederation agreements.

"They either have a hell of a budget for housing parolees or you are one lucky bastard." Matt was looking around at James's little yard.

"Yeah, they're trying to win me over to the Dark Side. Or coddle me, 'cause they know I'm slowly cracking up." Shit, he hadn't meant to say that. He looked away from Matt.

Matt leveled an intense stare at him. He could feel it hitting the side of his head. "So, on that note, let's get you the hell out of here tonight."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea. Apparently I've been assigned a 'caseworker' and I have a meeting with her at 0845. I'm thinking it'd be smarter to wait and see her."

“What if meeting with her doesn’t mean any change in your surveillance? You could still have someone looking for you twenty minutes after we leave, wanting to do your daily check-in.”

“I don’t think so. Apparently now I’ve got the same guy every day, for a while at least. I think he might stick to the same late-afternoon, early-evening time frame for another day, at least. Especially since I have this meeting.”

“How long’s the meeting?”

James shrugged. They continued to hash it out, discussing the best approach to the job. Between the beer and the talk, James started to slip back into that place he’d been eight years before, that brief period when Matt had been his friend. James had liked him, so much he was afraid to let himself admit it. It had almost been a relief when he’d caught Steve and Matt together. It meant James hadn’t been forced to face something he wasn’t ready for. Something he didn’t fully face until five years later, when he first got his implant.

“So, whadya think?” Matt was looking at him, clear blue eyes looking into his. James let his brain come back into the present moment.

“Sorry.” he cleared his throat. “What do I think about…?”

Matt gave him another penetrating look. “About me staying in the Brick-and-Mortar Inn tonight, and I’ll stick around until you return from your appointment. James, we gotta get you outta here, buddy,” he added softly. Almost like he cared about him.

James was pretty sure he didn’t deserve any caring from Matt, but he wanted it. He cleared his throat again. “Yeah, I gotta get my head screwed on straight.” Then he decided to share something that was really starting to bug

him. “I can’t feel you.” Matt gave him a slightly worried look. “I mean in my head. Your brain waves or whatever.”

“You said not everyone put them out there.”

“Well, most people do, and you did at first. But sometime this afternoon, it’s like you stopped somehow.”

Matt was silent a minute. “How about now?”

Suddenly, James could feel Matt there, pushing his thoughts out toward him. “Yeah, now I can.” James looked at him questioningly.

Matt seemed pleased with himself. “I was trying not to let you pick up on them, earlier.”

“Why?” James had no reason or right, but he felt a little bit hurt.

“I just figured it must be annoying for you, always picking up brain waves. Thought you might like some quiet.” He shrugged.

James blinked hard a couple of times. He cleared his throat. “Yeah, I do like it. Thank you.”

Matt shrugged and turned the conversation back to the business of getting James the hell out of Idaho.

They worked out the plans for “what if” and Matt finished his beer, crumpled the pouch, and said good night. James sat there for another hour, lost in thought. Mostly about “what if.”

KANDY MELORE was a sharp, small-featured, angry little woman. And a homophobe. She made a point of telling James—frequently—how she tried not to let her personal views affect her treatment of her clients.

The woman was a grade-A prime bitch. He could feel her intent to needle him. Quickly followed by irritation

when he appeared not to notice.

Mostly, James made no response to her unless he had to. It was a trick he had perfected back in childhood, when simply breathing around his father was guaranteed to irritate him. In school, he'd been quiet, but not shy. He just didn't speak unless he needed to. He'd learned at a young age that things were better that way.

In adulthood, James started talking more, sharing things that weren't strictly necessary. Once he had the implant and he could feel people's bewilderment and confusion over his silence, he became much more open.

But silence was always a useful tool, and an innate skill for James.

"Well, James." Ms. Melore gave him a toothy, insincere smile. "We're almost done here. Thank you so much for being patient with me." She paused, waiting for a response. James blinked. "There's just one more little matter. It appears your chip is giving us some trouble."

James's heart sped up, just a little. He cocked his head at Melore. She let her frustration at his reaction color her tone. "We're going to have to schedule you for recoding."

Why the hell couldn't they just recode while he was here?

"Tomorrow morning at 0800, you'll need to report to the POW facility in downtown, and they'll prep you for the procedure. It should only take a few minutes."

Clearly not just a recoding as James understood it. A suspicion of what was really going on began to form. He needed more info. "Malfunction?"

Her eyes widened in surprise; it was his first multisyllabic word since "Hello." James looked her in the eye, waiting for the answer.

Melore gave a little cough. “Yes. Apparently a manufacturing defect. You’ll be receiving a new chip.”

James almost flinched. Getting the chip embedded in his femur sucked. When the nano packet broke apart and spread through the marrow it hurt like a sonofabitch. “One that was ignored for a month?”

She gave him her toothy smile. “I’m afraid that’s information I can’t share with you, James.” Her pleasure at his responsiveness almost kept him from speaking again, but he needed to know.

Hoping that what he’d done last night was real, he said, “I want to know,” and gave Melore a mental push, trying to force the answer out of her mouth. He could feel it hovering right there, and if he pushed it just like *that*….

“It stopped working.” She snapped her mouth shut, flushing. Then the blood drained from her face. “How did you do that?” she hissed. Her face twisted into a pinched-mouth witch’s mask.

James raised an eyebrow. He could feel the rage coming off her in waves. He considered how pissed she could get, and what the consequences would be. “I didn’t do anything, Ms. Melore.” He tried something new, pushing a little sincerity her way.

He really needed it to work.

Kandy Melore got a slightly dazed look on her face, staring somewhat blankly at James. Finally she cleared her throat. “I believe that’s all, James. Report to the POW clinic at 0800 sharp tomorrow morning. I’ll see you at this time next week, as well.” She turned to her embedded datascreen, dismissing him from her mind. Or trying to appear to.

Well, that was interesting.

—CHAPTER 5—

MATT got Andry again on vid in the morning, but insisted on talking to Lance this time. Andry then lurked behind Lance's shoulder, sulking. "You're going to make a hell of an agent," Matt said. Andry scowled, but then made an effort to blank his expression and stand straighter.

God, you'd think he was eight and not eighteen most of the time.

"What's up, Matt?" Grampa smiled at him over his plate of eggs.

"James is Psi-force, Lance."

Lance's eyes widened a little. "Ayala say anything about needing to stay?"

"He says it's not some kind of down-low black op and he's ready to go. There's a complication. I won't go into it now, but it's need-to-know and I needed to know." Even if he didn't technically have that clearance.

Lance's eyebrows went up. Andry perked up a little behind him. But Lance just asked for his current status.

"In Boise, heading out about 0945 if everything goes well. I'll check in at 1930. Ayala wants to go with the backup route."

"Understood." Lance signed off.

James showed up—coming through the door of the empty supply room like it was unlocked—at 1007. Matt saw

James's smirk at his surprise, and it reminded him to shield his thoughts.

But Matt had rigged that door.

"I don't get how you do that." James kept his voice low.

"What?" Matt asked, inspecting the locking mechanism. "I can't figure out how you did this."

"I'm SOUF. How do you just turn off your brain waves like that?"

"I'll tell you if you show me how to do that with the lock."

"Fine, but not right now. I wanna get out of here. I think we need to leave now."

Matt looked up at the suddenly sharp note in James's voice. "Okay. Let's go camping." He saved his questions until after they'd silently crept from the room—the store below was open, now—and made it to the alley behind the building.

James beat him to it. "Tell me how you did that, turned it off like that."

"I don't really know. I just think about it. Like I think: 'okay, stop broadcasting to James,' and I do. I can turn it on again the same way. Or if I haven't been around you for a while. Maybe it sort of wears off. You can tell me if you pick me up again. What camping gear do you have?"

"Stuff any hunter would have. I started buying it as soon as I got out. Hunting's a fucking religion here, so they weren't going to stop me."

"They didn't let you buy a rifle?" No way.

James gave him a sardonic look. "This is the Red, dude. I couldn't get anything much, but I got an old projectile shotgun on the underground arms market."

"No fucking way." Matt was incredulous.

“Way. These people are serious about the right to bear arms.”

“These people are dumbasses.”

James gave his trademark snort. “Also have some digi-camo, hunter’s camo—no safety colors—and random other things. No food, no shelter except my sleeping bag.”

“The digi-camo could save our asses.”

“Money talks even if you have a pink triangle on your chest. And it helps when you know how bad your seller wants it.”

Matt headed out. James didn’t ask any questions, just followed Matt a klick or so through quiet neighborhoods, until they came to an ancient, decrepit bungalow. After pointing it out, they walked past, and James waited at a nearby coffee kiosk.

James watched Matt go to the bungalow and knock on the door. A sunny woman in her mid-thirties followed him over to James.

“Hi, James. I’m Lauryl,” she said in a smooth, low voice. He could read her agenda clearly: complete devotion to Blue resistance.

“This is my friend Alys’s kiosk. Why don’t we step inside?”

Matt just raised an eyebrow and dipped his head toward the kiosk. James raised an eyebrow back and followed her inside, Matt crowding in behind.

“You’re very quiet, Matt,” Lauryl commented.

He smiled. “This guy doesn’t need the regular reassurances.” He started digging in his pack.

It occurred to James that he was being very trusting. He wouldn't normally follow anyone this blindly. His gut told him to go for it, and his implant sensed no threat. It hadn't been wrong so far. He shrugged and smiled a little sheepishly at Lauryl.

Matt crouched down and planted his right leg in front of him. James watched him unseal the side seam of his all-weathers over the calf. He was trying to puzzle it out when Matt pressed hard on his calf muscle, and then the whole thing just slid down. "Holy shit!"

Matt grinned up at him. "Never seen that before, huh?" He went back to removing various devices from his hollow leg. A hollow, fake leg, with very convincing skin covering it.

"Th'fuck, Matt?" It wasn't the fake leg; it was that *Matt* had it. "What happened?"

"Old-tech landmine in New Mexico. About four years ago. This is my super-fancy secret agent prosthesis, aka tech-pantry."

James was speechless. Matt would have been what? Nineteen? Way too fucking young to lose a leg. It happened, he knew it. He just didn't want it happening to anyone he knew. Or maybe to Matt.

James tried to choke out an appropriate response. "Guess it could have been worse." He shrugged awkwardly. "Could have been an atomizer mine." God, what a lame thing to say. He wanted to kick himself. Maybe he could borrow Matt's leg to do it.

"I tell myself that every morning after I've slept on the ground."

"Guess I'll be telling you this trip," James mumbled. *Lame. Lame, lame, lame, lame-o*.

“Here we go.” Matt handed a tiny flat case and a small recoder up to Lauryl. James had forgotten she was there, she was so still, mentally and physically. She nodded and waited for Matt to put himself back together.

“When’s your next check-in?” Lauryl turned to James.

“Gut feeling? I think I’m good until tomorrow at 0800. But we have to talk.”

Matt stood up, stomping his leg to get his pant leg to settle around his boot. “Always something, isn’t it?”

“The meeting this morning. My new ‘caseworker’ said my chip is malfunctioning. Supposed to go in at 0800 and get a whole new one.”

Matt whistled. “That’d be a bitch.” He took the recoder from Lauryl and read James’s chip. “Shit.”

“What?”

“It’s tracking. They’re either lying to you and putting something else in, or it’s only malfunctioning part of the time.”

Then it clicked for James. “Um, Lauryl, can you wait outside for us?” She just nodded and left, no questions asked.

James concentrated a moment. Then he looked at Matt. “Try it now.”

Matt knelt down to get a clearer reading from the higher nano concentration in James’s femur, although they should have circulated all through his bloodstream.

“Fuck me running,” Matt said softly. “It’s completely wacko, now.” He was staring intently at the recoder. Then he suddenly looked up at James. “It’s you, isn’t it? You’re messing with it.”

James nodded, struck mute by Matt’s position. He was on his knees in front of him, head level with his dick. His

blue eyes looked straight into James's.

Fuuuuuuck. Instant wood.

Matt glanced at the recoder again. "This's weird, James. It's reading like you're doing something aerobic. Like having sex," he joked then looked up again. Except his eyes got caught by the growing bulge in James's camos.

James bet that explained things for him.

Matt blushed a little, but he also grinned. "Feel a little differently about me than in high school?" He looked up at James. Through his lashes. It was a practiced, seductive look. And it was totally successful.

James could feel his face flush, his lips part. Without thinking, he licked them.

Matt's mental barrier against James started to slip.

Seemed he felt differently than in high school too. "Yeah," James answered roughly.

James didn't try to hide anything. His reaction was all there for Matt to see. James's eyes followed Matt's bobbing Adam's apple. He glanced farther down, and could see a bulge in Matt's crotch.

Shit. James knew he shouldn't just stand here. He should step back. But he didn't.

James could tell Matt intended to stand up and end the situation. But he didn't. He didn't *really* want to. He knelt in front of James, pupils wide, mouth slightly open. Matt wanted to put his mouth on James—he could all but see the mental image.

James gave Matt that little mental nudge he'd been perfecting. The big head was no longer in charge.

Matt leaned forward, lips parting. God it was hot to see him on his knees, ready to suck James's cock. James groaned when he felt Matt's hot breath through his camos.

Matt flinched back at the noise and jerked his eyes up to James's.

Oh.

Fuck.

James closed his eyes and swallowed, blood draining from his face. He was such a fucking prick. "Dude, sorry. I'm sorry. Didn't mean—"

"Did you *make* me do that?"

James paused then opened his eyes. "Kinda?"

Matt growled and punched his thigh. Not hard, but James flinched. "How much?"

"How much what?"

"How much did you make me feel?"

"Um." James swallowed again. "I can't make you do anything you aren't already thinking about." *I don't think.* "I just pick up what's in the forefront of your mind and, uh…," he wiggled his fingers at Matt's head, "nudge you a little."

Matt stood up. "You are one scary motherfucker, James Ayala." His voice was low and angry. He pointed his finger in James's face. "You wait here. I'll get you when I'm ready to deal with you." Matt slammed out of the kiosk.

Dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit. James closed his eyes and leaned against the wall. He felt sick.

And hard.

He was such a fucking prick.

—CHAPTER 6—

THEY didn't speak unless absolutely necessary until they hit the outskirts of Boise. Finally James broke.

"I'm an asshole."

Matt snorted derisively, but kept walking. They were on a trail that shadowed a minor highway. The path was weedy, dusty, and not very green. They weren't hiding, exactly. Just not drawing attention.

Matt had programmed the recoder to turn on the dummy chip and turn off James's chip simultaneously. They left his pink triangle shirt and the dummy with Lauryl. She would leave them on James's doorstep before 1730. They'd decide in the morning whether to reset James's chip to level-two parolee or just leave it off. If left off, they would have to avoid militia patrols, government and private.

Now, they looked like any other hunters going out for the weekend. It was a typical fall, meaning very little rain. It made for nice, warm days generally. The nights were cold, a biting breeze always blowing up and sinking into your bones. The rainy season would begin soon.

Governments like the RIA were still debating whether global warming was caused by humans. No one debated whether it was happening anymore. From the Rockies to the Mississippi, rainfall had almost stopped. What had once been old America's breadbasket was now a rapidly

expanding desert. With a rapidly expanding destitute population.

Idaho got lucky. Idaho, eastern Oregon, and eastern Washington received nearly double the rainfall of one hundred years before. Idaho's population was poor as hell for different reasons. Like shitty foreign trade policies.

"You are an asshole." Matt had waited so long to answer James's thought he still wasn't speaking to him. "Why the hell didn't you tell me you could do that?"

James gave an uncomfortable shrug. After a hard stare, Matt faced front and kept walking, waiting for James's explanation.

"I only figured it out yesterday; wasn't even totally sure until this morning."

"Nice skill," Matt grumbled. "Keep it th'fuck away from my head!"

"'K." What was he going to say? He could get out of here without Matt, now that he'd taken care of the little chip problem, but he didn't want to. Even if Matt was being a sulky brat.

James was so fucked. He had a *thing* for Matt. Had always wanted him, and seven years apart hadn't changed that.

"Listen, I don't know if I should trust you, but for some reason I do. Which is completely fucked," Matt added in a mutter to himself. "But if you pull that shit again, you're on your own. Can you even control it?" Matt stopped again to look James in the eye.

"I think so. Yeah. Long as my little head's not in control." He tried a smile.

Matt rolled his eyes. "Th'fuck." More muttering followed as he continued on. "Y'know, I shouldn't even be doing this. I shoulda told Grampa to give this job to

someone else. Conflict of interest. I'm a QESA agent in fucking *Idaho*, with possibly the most dangerous extraction *ever*—"

That had to be an exaggeration, didn't it?

"—and it's some complete *asshole* who was a bigoted prick who called me a *fag* in high school and then had the balls to come out of the closet *in a Red POW camp*! Jesus Christ, this is fucking *stupid*."

"I was out of the closet before then." James could hear the sulky note in his voice, now. He could be a brat too. It was only fair.

"Ha!" Matt laughed derisively. "Right! And what brought that on? It wasn't the complete absence of pussy in prison camp?"

"Fuck you." Totally sulky now.

Matt kept grumbling to himself, quieter now. James let him pull ahead more. This was going to be a really fucking long hike.

MATT was pissed enough to push his leg almost too far. Or maybe it *was* too far; he'd find out in the morning. When he'd agreed to the new hollow-calf leg prosthesis, he figured it had to be an improvement on his first prosthesis. That one had been too damn heavy. And it ached where it knit into his femur. When the weather changed, when he hiked too much, sometimes for no reason he could figure.

It hadn't occurred to him that the geniuses who made the hollow leg might not have worked out all the little ergonomic quirks. So now he had a new, lighter leg, true, but it still ached where it knit into his thigh. And still ached when he walked too much. But it sure made taking illegal tech into the Red a hell of a lot easier. And the artificial

nerves in the derma-coat were almost like having real skin again.

Matt's thigh was ready to call it quits by the time they made it to the outskirts of Emmett. They were heading northwest on secondary routes, over a low pass and down into Jackass Gulch (how apropos) then into Emmett valley. It wasn't an obvious route, and didn't have the heavier traffic of the Snake River plain.

James flopped down. "I spent a while in POW camp before being sent to re-education. They aren't much interested in prisoners working out. I'm almost outta shape for this." He gave Matt an easy grin. When Matt just scowled at him, he sighed and turned away. "So, why didn't we stop at the shelter?"

Camping shelters in Idaho were plentiful, since so many people were forced to use non-motorized transportation. But the quality was uneven since they were all privately owned. Not to mention landowners could charge as much or as little as they wanted for travelers to stay there.

Matt didn't want to stay in them because he liked to avoid other travelers. There was a chance someone could be a spy, or tracking them. He also had perimeter alarms he could set up at a campsite. It was expensive tech here, but not illegal. Would raise a few eyebrows, but if anyone found it it'd be because they stumbled into the perimeter. Matt could deflect their curiosity over the alarms with outrage over his privacy being intruded on. Personal rights were sacred here.

James had to know all that. Matt squinted at him. "Are you asking to make me talk to you, or because you're that rusty?"

James gave his by-now typical snort. "Trying to get you to talk to me."

“Shut up and make dinner. I’m setting up the perimeter.”

James sighed and got water out of some tributary of the Payette River, next to their camping site. He ran the water through the UV filter and started digging through the MREs. Matt watched him raise an eyebrow over the quantity and variety. So he liked food. Shoot him.

“I want stroganoff,” he snapped. “The purply-brown capsules.” Then he went to set up the alarms.

When he got back, James had rehydrated dinner. Matt raised his own eyebrow at the salmon soufflé James had chosen. They ate in silence.

When Matt checked in, Grampa Sid answered. In some ways Matt was Sid’s spitting image. Matt had always felt close to him, even though he (like everyone else) followed in Lance’s footsteps professionally. “Wow, Gramps, what’d Lance have to do to get you to work vid com?”

Sid laughed and leered. “You really wanna know, kid?”

“Gah! No! Forget I said that; just making conversation.”

Sid sobered up. “The shit’s hitting the fan around here. Everyone and their dog is working a screen.” Just then, Anais walked behind Sid and gave Matt a wave. Her mouth was tight, though. The woman was a SOUF legend, and if she was there, things had to be bad. She didn’t come out of retirement for anything less than full-scale emergencies. “Get your headset,” Sid told him, recalling his attention.

Matt glanced at James, who gave him an expressionless nod and turned away. With the headset Matt could hear QESA but James couldn’t, and he could subvocalize responses. “’K. Go.”

“You know this Ayala by sight?”

Gramma Anais was out of her den for something to do with James? “Yep. No mistakes.”

“Any chance it’s someone else? Or AI?”

Shit. “My gut says no. He knew stuff about high school no one else should know.” Knowing about Steve was unlikely for an imposter. Right? “Can AI emote?” James had definitely shown emotion. Something Matt hadn’t been sure he was capable of, previously. Huh. Imposter?

Nah. Matt shook his head in denial.

“Not that anyone knows. It’s doubtful the Red would come up with emoting robots first. No imposter, huh? You’re gonna have to send me a retinal scan, son.”

“Shit,” Matt sighed. “’K. Tell me why?”

“Lance requested the original paperwork on the contract request from SpecOps HQ, and found out it didn’t originate in either ArmySF SubCom or SOUFCOM. They both had unconfirmed intel saying he’s dead. KIA in a POW escape attempt two months ago, pending verification.”

“They expect genetic verification?”

“Yeah. Basically, some guy who successfully escaped said his fellow escapee, First Lieutenant James Ayala, died in the attempt. Guy has no proof, of course. It’s beginning to look suspicious. And then there’s the whole question of who contracted for the extraction.”

Matt hesitated. “Gramps, it’s him. I’m betting my life on it by camping out with the bastard.”

Sid laughed a little. “You sound a little conflicted, Matt. Is he a bastard, or are you going to bet your life on him?”

“Don’t try any of your psych shit on me, you old fart. Hang on and I’ll transmit the scan.”

“Wait, one more thing. Noah Cabrone is in Confederated Red States custody. The Boulder Blue

resistance cell had a double agent, and the whole cell collapsed today. There's no Blue backup in Red Satellite Tracking anymore."

Fuck.

"We have three other extractions in serious jeopardy. You're only code yellow. Send the scan and check in at 0730."

"'K. On it."

"Love you," Sid said. Then he then signed off. Matt rolled his eyes. Mushy old goat. Even if it did make his chest feel kinda warm.

After unhooking his earpiece, Matt got James's attention. "Buddy, gonna need you to do something for me."

"So, now I'm your buddy? You must need it bad."

Matt froze momentarily at the way *that* sounded. He shook it off. "Still sulking? Thought you'd be over that by now," Matt said lightly. James flushed a little and sat up straighter.

"Yeah, sorry," he muttered. Matt marveled at this James. The idea the guy was an imposter ran through his head again, but he rejected it, again. He may not be the even-tempered, nearly emotionless guy most people saw in high school, but Matt had seen a different side of him, even then. Not a particularly *happy* side, but still. This was the same James.

Matt got out the scanner, stretching his leg out in front of him. He'd just left the thing open, with all the tech he needed. James looked resigned. "Whadya need?"

"Retina."

James silently leaned forward and looked into the scanner. At least it only took a split second. After Matt transmitted the scan and was putting his tech pantry back

together, James asked, “So, can you tell me what that was all about?”

James had his blank mask on, Matt saw when he looked. He finished sealing his dermal layer and thought a second.

So, James pissed him off, possibly even violated his mind this morning. But Matt didn’t *feel* violated. Just pissed. He didn’t think about why for the moment, just tried to decide how he wanted to deal with this.

Looking back up into James’s eyes, Matt knew he was going to tell him. The scan was already sent. What could James do? Besides, Matt had the DEW, was trained to use it, and was in better condition than James, anyway.

Well, maybe that last part was a stretch. And James had a shotgun.

“SOUFCOM and ArmySF SubCom say you’re dead. The retina is another level of verification that you aren’t.”

James went from blank to stunned in .6 seconds. Matt watched a little frown line form between his brows. He swallowed. “Another level?”

Matt shrugged and looked down to reseal his pant seam. “I said I was convinced it was you. No AI, no imposter.”

“I’m not dead,” James pointed out.

Matt gave a short laugh. “Nope, look pretty alive to me. But you’re sure fucking different. Coulda gone for the imposter theory, I guess.”

“Why didn’t you?”

Matt looked back at him, surprised. “’Cause you aren’t. Are you?”

“No, but you said it. I’m sure th’fuck different. I could be making you think you know, unequivocally, that I’m the real James Jeremiah Ayala from Weimer, Oregon, that you went to high school with. Why do you even believe the implanted tech story?”

“Jeremiah? That’s a charming middle name, James.” Matt grinned broadly. James glowered.

So Matt threw up his hands and tried to explain. “Listen, I’m still pissed off at you for this morning, but I know you didn’t mean to do it. Exactly. I also know you aren’t messing with my head, now. You’re you. But if you keep talking, I might start doubting myself. So keep it up if you want me to restrain you and leave you here.”

James couldn’t help it. He laughed. Matt had opened his mind again—closed all day, James realized—and Matt believed what he was saying.

So James laughed from relief, and a little fear. And because Matt believing him against all evidence to the contrary made him feel better than he had in months.

And he laughed just a bit at the idea that Matt could restrain him. “I didn’t mean to make you feel that way this morning.”

“You said you didn’t make me feel anything, right? You just knew what I, uh, wanted and nudged me a little. Right?”

James nodded, looking down at the ground. For some reason, this whole day had made him feel like he was ten years old all over again.

Matt shrugged, almost too nonchalantly. “So I wanted to suck you. You wanted me to suck you. We’re guys. Sex

means shit emotionally. And for some ridiculous reason, I believe you when you say you won't fuck with my head again."

"Fuck," James said with a sigh. "Yeah." He'd never felt more off balance in his life. It had to be whatever the fuck this implant was doing to his brain.

Didn't it?

A perimeter alarm suddenly blared into the night. It had to be theirs. It sounded like the standard-issue Klaxon Industries wail.

Matt leapt up and pulled a laser DEW pistol from the holster in the small of his back. James was on his feet too. He was sure he was nearly as deadly one-on-one as with the projectile shotgun he'd left strapped to his pack. It wasn't ego that told him; it was experience.

What his ego was currently telling him was that he was a dumbshit for leaving the twelve-gauge three meters away.

Matt was facing northeast, James southwest. He could feel Matt drawing breath when someone started yelling.

"Well Jesus Christ on a bicycle! What in all hell is that racket? What you boys got set up out here? Goddamn, 's gettin' so a man can't 'sociate with another man without setting off some kinda goddamn alarms. Now turn it off! We ain't gonna hurt ya none." James could hear and feel someone come out of the brush facing Matt.

"Who's we?" Matt demanded. "Everybody where I can see 'em or I'll just start shooting." His voice was perfectly calm, clipped.

"Jus' me and my boy. Now stop pointin' that goddamn thing at me and turn this damn alarm off."

James could hear the smile in Matt's voice. "Once I see your son, I'll stop pointing this goddamn thing at you."

The man grumbled under his breath, then called out, “Norris, come on out or this asshole’s liable to shoot me!” More rustling bushes came behind James. Matt had them covered.

“No one else?” Matt asked. He turned the alarm off remotely.

“Nope.” Norris answered this time.

“Who’s in the tree back here?” James asked. He could feel the guy more than see him. There was a long silence.

“Oh, that’s my other son, Nate. Forgot about him.” Forgetting your son. Could happen to anyone.

James rolled his eyes. “C’mon down, Nate, or I’ll tell my cousin here to start slicing off limbs.” It was hard to do with that kind of pistol, but James was figuring these guys weren’t familiar with the weaponry. “Want me to check it out?” He subvocalized to Matt while waiting for Nate.

“Perimeter alarms at about four meters.” When Nate joined the fam, James grabbed the shotgun and walked the perimeter, listening to the negotiations between Matt and the intruders.

“Now what in the hell are you doin’ campin’ out here with some kind alarm on your site? People’ll think yer downright unfriendly. Or ya got something to hide. I could be the landowner, fer all you know, and I coulda shot first and asked questions later.”

“You the landowner?” Matt’s tone was dry.

There was a little hemming and hawing, some throat clearing. “Well, no, but I coulda been.”

“How do you know I’m the not the landowner? Or my cousin?”

Puzzled silence. “Well, why ’n hell would you be out here campin’?” His tone was incredulous.

James could almost hear Matt's shrug. "Like camping."

"Ya must," one of the sons chimed in. "Ya got some damned expensive equipment to be the kinda guys that need to be campin'." These guys clearly did need to camp, for economic reasons.

"'S a hobby. How come you guys didn't stay at that shelter outside Emmett tonight?"

"Headin' southeast, didn't make it afore dark."

"How come you didn't stop at the shelter at Tom's Cabin?" James asked as he stepped back into the little clearing.

"Full." The old man gave a strangled little cough.

James knew as well as Matt these guys were full of it, even without the brain voodoo. They were armed—typical in Idaho—and were wearing standard military-issue camo all-weathers. Not that unusual, just suspicious. They couldn't be RIA militia, but they could be with any number of municipal militias. Or a poorly funded private militia.

He also knew what was going to happen. James didn't want these guys here, but he really didn't want to send them packing and not know where they were.

Matt opened his mental dam and confirmed what James was thinking. Looked like they had guests for the night.

—CHAPTER 7—

Matt took first watch. Instead of telling James, he let his intentions to do so flow out of his head. James glanced at him and gave him a little nod.

This was fucking freaky. Partly the idea that James could understand his intentions, but even more freaky was how easy it was to control what he wanted to "tell" James.

He had completely untapped reserves of talent, looked like.

He watched James roll up in his bag and settle in. Matt turned off the solar-battery light and leaned against a tree, alert but relaxed. Either their "guests" were faking some very convincing snores, or they were asleep. He'd reset the perimeter alarms, in case of more bipedal, nocturnal visitors. James had his shotgun within easy reach this time. Typical SOUF. Except for that leaving-the-shotgun-with-his-sleeping-bag thing earlier. Matt smirked a little.

James started to snore. Oh well—at least it was somewhat entertaining. And he wasn't as attractive when he snored.

Matt glanced over at James. His forearms were bare even with the temperature dropping rapidly. He only wore a tight old-style T-shirt, and his broad shoulder was impressive even hunched over his chest in sleep.

And dammit, his hair was still sexy. Matt didn't recall ever finding any other guy's hair sexy. He didn't even like

curly hair. Except on James. His Basque ancestry gave him a golden skin tone, and his hair was a few shades darker, sort of brownish golden. Even his eyes were dark brownish gold, heavy on the gold. He should appear monochromatic and blah, but instead he gave the appearance of a lion. He was… tawny. Especially with the hair. It was sort of like a short mane. James even moved a little like a lion. Slow and smooth. Negligently graceful.

Matt's mind started to wander into areas better left alone. Like, what would it be like to be run down and caught by that lion, the back of your neck gripped in his jaws while he shoved his cock in you?

"Fuck," Matt muttered, rubbing his hand over his face. He was half hard and having bestiality fantasies about the guy who not only persecuted him in high school, but could crack his mind like an egg and make him do stuff he didn't want to do. Or did want to do, but knew was a very bad idea.

"You are a sick fuck," he told himself under his breath. He glanced back over at James. His eyes were open, watching Matt. Matt looked away after a second. Had he been projecting to him? "Fuck," he muttered one more time.

When he looked over again, James's eyes were closed. The snores started up again.

About four hours later, Matt was watching James again when he came awake suddenly, flailing a little and coughing, like he'd choked on something. "Bug," James muttered hoarsely, running a hand through his hair and blinking rapidly. Then he ran both hands over and down his face and sat up to face Matt. "Swallowed a bug in my sleep."

"They teach you that super-covert wake-up technique at Fort Lewis?"

James growled. “Time’s it?”

“0123. Oh that’s weird.”

“Huh?”

“It’s zero, one, two, three.”

James stared at him. “I’m going to take a leak. Then you need to hit your bag. You’re getting loopy.”

Matt kind of agreed. “Go toward the road. One of our ‘guests’ went down toward the river a minute ago.”

When James disappeared into the bushes to the south, “guest” number two reappeared from the opposite side of the campground. Matt watched unblinkingly while he rolled himself back into his worn Mylar cocoon. He seemed strangely meek. No defiant or sullen looks. Huh. No balls without Daddy to back him up.

James woke Matt up at 0600 with a pouch of instant-hot coffee. “God, I could get used to that.”

“Having someone bring you coffee in bed?”

That too. “Uh-huh. Nice, thanks.”

“Thought you’d wanna be outta here soon.” James gave him an intent look.

James wanted the match on that retinal scan as badly as Matt. More. They had to get away from their nighttime visitors before he could check in at 0730.

“Let’s get to it, then.”

By the time Matt was pulling up the perimeter alarm, their visitors were coming to. James had put the coffee away already, and Matt tried to work up a shred of guilt for having nothing to offer the intruders—oops, he meant

guests—but he just wasn't up to the job. Matt and James left with barely a word to them.

James hadn't asked for any details about their exact route. When Matt started looking for a good spot to check in from at 0715, James said, "It'll be nice to be myself again."

He either wasn't totally convinced that Matt believed he was James Jeremiah (ha!) Ayala, or he wasn't comfortable with everyone at QESA not believing. The people who could scrub this mission and strand him here. Not that they would.

Well, Anais might.

They weren't in the best spot for checking in. They'd entered the small town of Emmett, but it had been pretty much unavoidable. Matt's experience was that towns like this were often half abandoned, and it shouldn't be too hard to find someplace covert.

But the problem with this damn town was that it was too prosperous, and didn't have a lot of abandoned buildings or hidey-holes. Shit, this usually wasn't an issue. It must be one of those communities that had banded together and avoided selling their water rights and/or land to foreign agribusiness for a quick buck decades ago. Asia owned more land in Idaho than the locals did.

Matt was working toward a park he'd seen from the hill coming into town. There'd be something there.

"Here," James said quietly from behind him. Matt looked to where James indicated with his chin. There was a shipping container in that little ravine to the east of them.

"'S'exposed; can't get in without anyone seeing."

"D'you see it when we walked beside the ravine thirty seconds ago?"

"No." Matt scowled. Jerk just had to be observant.

James gave a little snort. Matt was starting to understand some of them. He was pretty sure that snort meant “you’re being immature,” aka “quit sulking, whiner.”

“If we go in under that little bridge over there, I can keep an eye out. Pretty sure your lines of sight are obscured.”

The ravine was an ag canal, but this time of year it was just a sun-baked gully with willow brush growing up its banks. Matt sat inside the somewhat rusted-out container with various somewhat creepy fauna and disassembled himself. This was annoying. Did other half-assed secret agents have to remove their faux calf muscle to phone home?

Fucking military doctors.

“Matt.” Andry greeted him with an overly formal nod.

“Andry.” Matt rolled his eyes. “Where’s Grampa?”

Before he could finish the question, Lance was kicking Andry off the vid-datascreen and greeting Matt.

“You still with Ayala?”

“What would I have done with him?”

“Thrown him in a river?” Lance looked cranky as all hell.

“He can swim. Okay, lay it on me, old man. Stop being grouchy and just spit it out.” Matt knew it couldn’t be good.

“His retina scan didn’t match the ones on file.”

Fuck. Fuckity-fuck-fuck. “How old are they?”

“From when they accepted him into Psi-force.”

“Nothing after that?”

“They don’t change much, Matt.”

Matt was thinking fast, about possibilities he hadn’t even entertained. “Can you overlay the scan I sent you on

the ones from his—Ayala's—record?"

Lance was obviously only just suppressing an eye roll. He turned to the other datascreen. Matt could see just enough of his face to see that his expression changed, but not to what. "Weird," he muttered. "Hang on a sec," he told Matt. He brought up more screens.

"All right. I'm transmitting the image of the overlay to you, and another overlay. We have to end this transmission; everyone's on short com. Look at these and reconnect in three hours with a plausible explanation for me."

Before Matt could acknowledge the unusual orders, Lance cut the vid feed. Matt's hookup chimed softly, indicating new mail. He opened the images from QESA.

And sucked in a breath. He'd thought this was a possibility, but wasn't really prepared for it. James's file retina print was laid over the scan Matt had sent, and showed an exact matchup. All the vessels in the original print matched the scan he'd taken, but in the scan there were extra vessels. Almost twice as many. Way more than a regular retina should have. And there was something about them….

Matt opened the second image. This time, the scan he'd sent had been split and each eye overlaid the other. The original vessel print had been removed. Only the new blood vessels were shown. They were a perfect match. It had to be intentional. Someone had to have implanted those blood vessels.

Or circuitry?

"Matt," a voice called almost silently from behind him. Matt whirled and reached for his pistol. James was looking at him from a rusted-out hole in the back side of the container. "We gotta go. Our nocturnal visitors are heading this way."

“Those guys again?” he asked, duck-walking for the back. That hole might be big enough to get through. “Which direction?”

“Same way we came in.” The back door exit was preferable.

“Can you help me open this thing up a little?”

“Use your weapon? Can you recharge it?”

“Doesn’t really have cutting capabilities. And I might have forgotten to recharge the solar charge-pack,” Matt admitted. “It’ll take a few hours to recharge.”

James sighed a little. “Let’s look for other options.”

Matt’s heart rate was beginning to pick up when they found an opening on the west side, near the wall of the ravine. James reported on the other guys’ progress from the northwest corner as Matt squirmed out.

“They know we’re in here, using willow brush and trying to approach us covertly. They don’t know we know they’re coming.”

“Shit.” Matt’s utility belt got stuck on a finger of metal. He tried to wrench himself free. He hated feeling like his legs were open to attack while his upper body was in the open. Well, sort of open—his head was mashed into the dirt wall outside the container. This was a graceful exit. “They had to have been following us.”

“I never saw them.”

Matt decided not to question James’s skills. For some reason he was hesitant to bruise James’s ego. Matt finally broke the small finger of steel holding him back and tumbled out. Okay, now he was eating dirt. And animal droppings? He got on his hands and knees and spit a couple of times. “How’s it look, now?”

“Hmmmm.”

“Hmmmm, *what?*” He demanded when James didn’t elaborate.

“They’re keeping an eye on the container, not moving. Feels like they’re waiting for something.”

“Like an airstrike?” That didn’t sound as sarcastic as it had in his head.

“No, like… backup.”

“Fucking lovely.” Matt spit one more time, then crept up and tried to peek over the top of the ravine on the west side. He couldn’t see jack, mostly because his head didn’t clear the top.

“Maybe you should let me keep an eye on them and you should be checking out other possibilities. You know, try and get in the open. Line of sight and all.” Couldn’t James pick up brain waves from a long way away? “Could the container be blocking you?”

James looked a bit startled. “Yeah. Not used to the range I have now. Wasn’t thinking.”

Matt crawled to James’s position as quietly as possible. He hadn’t been silent coming out of the container, but they subbed their voices to preserve every advantage they might have. James pointed out the other men’s positions, nodded at Matt and left.

Nothing happened in the five minutes James was gone, except one of their “guests” proved he was a fidgeter. The willow brush he hid behind kept wiggling.

James tapping on his shoulder startled him a little. Matt managed to stop himself from jumping. James gave him a disgusted look, but said, “Quite a few guys are coming right up the ravine, I think, from the south. Never saw them, but I was getting, I don’t know, a ricochet or something. Nothing from the west but some kids, I think we can make it out that way, if we can find someplace where

those guys can’t see us.” He indicated their watchers with his head.

“You didn’t find a path out?”

“Thought we’d better move together, I don’t know how close the others are. Still don’t know my range.”

Crap. They moved to the southern edge of the container, closer to the unknown threat, but away from the known danger. They could only go so far before they would be visible to Mr. Shaky Bush, in the southernmost position. “Hey, can you get a read on the guy who keeps fidgeting? What’s up with that?”

“Um, something’s bugging him. Physically. Maybe bug bites? Or… bugs?”

“Can you try your mental judo on him? Make him more distracted? Might get more distance before we’re exposed.”

“I can try and amplify his agitation. You’ll have to search, though, ’cause I can’t do both at once.” There was a moment of silence. Then James broke out in a slow smile. Matt was a little dazed. Had he ever seen James smile before? He wanted to see it again. It was a great smile.

“Okay, got him.” Matt whapped himself upside the head lightly to get his head back in the game. James looked at him strangely. “Dammit, got distracted, lost him. Okay, got him again.”

Okay then, no distracting the psychic warrior. Matt moved south, keeping to the sparse vegetation as much as possible. Two meters past where they were visible to Mr. Fidgety, he found a tiny gulley in the side of the ravine. It was dry and sunk into the dirt maybe twenty-five to thirty centimeters. At best. Yay. Vertical belly-crawling.

When he turned back toward James, he saw the willow brush shaking so hard little clods of dirt were rolling down

the wall of the ravine. Matt smirked his way back to James. “Found it; let’s go.”

They made it to the little wash without attracting the attention of the fidgeter, but James had sweat beading his forehead. Matt could feel his concentration half on following Matt’s boots and half on the guy he was distracting. “Shit,” James hissed. He must have lost it again. Matt was just in the wash, and James went for the land-speed record in army crawl and crowded in behind him, pushing the whole length of his body into Matt’s. His groin was against Matt’s ass, the muscles in his chest hard against Matt’s back.

Uhn. Matt tried not to shiver. And tried to refocus on the objective. What was it?

Oh, yeah. *Escape with life intact.*

James nudged him to get Matt moving. He moved.

Once he reached the top of the ravine, Matt stayed flat and rolled away from the edge. James rolled up next to him without incident.

Then something hit Matt in the thigh. He was on his back, reaching for his weapon, searching the open space behind them.

A crowd of preteen kids was staring at them. A football was lying on the grass nearby. Fortunately, his hand was mostly hiding his weapon between him and James.

“Nice observational skills,” James rumbled.

“Hey, guys,” Matt was using his most engaging smile and his pleasant voice. “Um, we’re just playing some mock battle games in the ravine with our buddies.”

The kids all relaxed, and one tall boy held out his hand for the football. James sat up and reached across Matt to throw it to him, while Matt put his weapon in his back holster. “Who are you?” the kid asked.

“We’re from Boise,” James informed him calmly. “Came up for some new terrain. Needed a challenge.”

This was apparently believable, judging by the way most of the kids started to wander away. “Wanna help us out?” Matt asked.

The kids’ eyes showed interest. “Sure,” a smaller girl said. Matt bet she was the one really in charge here. She had a look of Anais about her. “Whaddya want us to do?”

“When they come up here looking for us, tell them we went upriver. They’ll probably try to claim we’re criminals, fake you out, but don’t buy it. They’re just trying to win. There’s like ten of them and only two of us.”

Was that a guess or did James know how many were coming?

The kids all liked the idea of messing with the grown-ups, so James and Matt took off west with their full cooperation.

“How do you know they weren’t just messing with us? They could tell those guys anyway.”

“They won’t. They thought we were cool.” James had a smug quirk to his lips.

Duh. Mental judo.

They put off parsing out the near-ambush until they were the hell away from Emmett, and had at least a little breathing room.

So they kept moving, Matt musing over James’s ability to express emotion with, apparently, the use of only three facial muscles. Well, except for that smile in the ravine. Otherwise, the man was all subtle lip quirks and snorting. The scariest part was Matt had been around him less than two days and already understood most of them.

—CHAPTER 8—

MATT knew he and James had to talk sooner or later about this morning. “About my check-in….”

“Yeah?” James was wary. “I’m cleared, right? I’m me?” He sounded as if he knew he wasn’t.

“Well, sorta.” Another snort, a sort of weary-sounding one. “Your scans didn’t match the file prints, at least not initially.”

James was silent, waiting for the explanation.

“When you lay the file print over the scan I took, the blood vessels match exactly, but the scans also have way more vessels. And if you lay the new vessel patterns over each other, *they* match exactly.”

James was silent so long Matt wondered if he was going to have to explain it more clearly. But then James said, “Well, fuck me pink. They put the implant on my retinas?”

“Seems like something got added in there, doesn’t it? Pink? Really?”

“How does that not fuck up my eyesight?” James mused. Matt shrugged. It was getting near his special order check-in time. They had to find a secure place to stop for a while.

“It doesn’t, and we have more immediate problems. I’ve been ordered to com again at 1030.”

James raised an eyebrow, but started visual scouting. Soon, he pointed out an almost dry creek bed that led up to the bench formation north of the river. “We could probably follow that, stay out of sight, find a good, defensible position not too far from the river.”

After they started up the narrow valley, James got nervous. He started falling behind, and holding his head funny. Still and cocked, like a dog sniffing the air or listening to some noise out of human hearing range.

Matt stopped. “Okay, what is it, James?”

“I think… they’re closing in on us pretty fast all at once. Coming up the river behind us. The echo is different. They seem kind of, I don’t know, satisfied, or gleeful. Expectant.” James looked a little spacey, like he was focused on something not quite there.

Matt took his word for it. “So, whadya think?”

“I think we should get up past that bend, let them pass us, then go back to the river and backtrack. Maybe. If I can determine their proximity.”

Fuckity-fuck. He was working with a faulty psychic. *Just when you thought you had the advantage.* Judging from the sharp look James sent him, Matt guessed he’d let that sentiment leak out. He sighed, turned, and kept going.

They were staying to rocky areas, trying not to leave a trail, when James stiffened.

“What?” Matt felt James’s alarm instantly.

“Listen.”

He held his breath, ignored the heartbeat in his eardrums. Okay, insects buzzing, water running in the creek bed, and…, “Fuck!” His voice came out nearly a whisper.

Dogs. Baying, hunting dogs. Hunting them?

“Get in the water.”

“They’ll know we went this way.”

“Got a better idea?”

“Fuck.”

Soon they were slogging at a near run in the water, and Matt’s right quad was burning. It reminded him of why, even when his leg seemed mostly normal most of the time, he hadn’t been welcome to stay in Special Operations Unified Force, even in gray ops. It still just wasn’t quite *right*. It was good, even amazing compared to what vets got a century or even twenty-five years ago, but it wasn’t the same as the real thing.

“Hold up here, Matt.” They had come around an oxbow in the creek. James grabbed his short-barreled shotgun from the holster he’d rigged onto his pack, and then shucked the pack into the water. He climbed out onto the bed and up the steep bank. James rolled onto the flat ground capping the bank, looking out over the downstream arm of the oxbow. “Shoot anything that comes around that corner.”

“Want my pistol? I can handle the twelve-gauge.”

“Don’t need accuracy,” James said, looking like a sniper to Matt. Well, one with a shotgun. James was lying still on the top of the bank, sighting the gun. Matt decided to shut up and let the man get to it.

He wasn’t totally prepared when James pulled the trigger. Their pursuers were closer than he’d realized, and it happened far sooner than Matt expected. And *damn* that thing was loud. The yelping and screaming that followed was almost louder.

James slithered back down and grabbed up his pack. “Run,” he said tersely. So they ran. Within three hundred meters, the creek valley began to widen, increasing the

chances they'd be spotted. Matt made for the small farm he saw ahead to the south.

"Find a vehicle, any kind." James ordered. Matt used little caution approaching the outbuildings while James stayed crouched by the creek bed, looking back the way they'd come. His line of sight was truncated by a number of sharp bends.

Matt found what had to be the oldest hybrid vehicle he'd ever seen in the small machine-shed nearest the farmhouse. It was an old-style pickup that had "Chevrolet" impressed on the tailgate. The thing had to be at least eighty years old. Or older. Chevrolet had finally gone under (for the last time) in about 2030. Jesus, he hoped James had a clue how to operate this thing. There was no time to look for another option. Whatever vehicles were normally parked on either side of the pickup were gone.

He started back to tell James he'd found something, but remembered he could send him a mental message. Okay, this psychic thing was kinda handy. He flattened himself on the wall next to the shed opening and sent the info into the ether. Then he covered James—semi-crouched and ass-backward—up to the shed.

"It must be good, whatever it is. You felt dubious," James said as he came in, blinking rapidly to adjust his eyesight from outside to low light.

Matt wondered what dubious felt like. "Yeah, it's good. I hope you really can drive anything, 'cause this is way beyond me."

James whistled when he caught sight of the automobile. "It's been a while, but I drove an early twenty-first-century pickup once. As long as I don't have to hotwire it, I'm good."

Hotwire…?

“We’re in business,” James said, peering in the window. “Get in the truck bed. I’ll give you my shotgun and you can cover us when we back out. You know how to use it?”

“I used one once, so I guess I’m as reliable as you are with the driving thing.”

“’K. It’s got grenade shells in it.”

Holy shit. No wonder there hadn’t been any sign of their pursuers yet. “How in the hell did you get those? Shit, James, this tailgate is held on by flexies. Remember that when you’re navigating with me in the back of this thing.”

James’s lips quirked as he threw their packs in the cab. “I’ll be careful. Traded a blow job for the shells.”

Matt laughed shortly. His experience had been that some twisted sexual offers were made in the Red.

James’s definition of “careful navigation” did not really square with Matt’s, at least not when he was the one sliding around in the back of a truck. He spent more time trying to stay in the thing than covering their asses.

When he got settled again after sliding back (James violently stopped after lurching backward out of the shed), bouncing up and slamming down (hole in the packed dirt drive), and sliding into the cab wall violently (no idea how James managed that), he could just see guys coming out of the creek bed. He had an impression of four or five men, a dog and a bandaged arm before he fired a shell in their general direction. James spun out the tires in the powdered dirt next to the road, then gained traction and leapt onto the pavement.

Matt hadn’t known that cars could leap, but he was now a believer.

“Jesus. Fucking maniac.” He flopped out on the bed of the vehicle and watched the clouds race by overhead. He

turned his head and watched the road race by through a rusted-out hole in the side of the pickup.

Nice.

—CHAPTER 9—

MATT was almost two hours late checking in. Lance himself answered, his lips in a tight line.

"You're late."

"I was busy." Matt rolled his eyes.

Lance rolled his eyes back. "Any problems I need to know about?"

Matt shrugged. "It was on the more exciting side of the close-call scale. Things are a little easier when your extractee is SOUF."

Lance's mouth relaxed a little, and he even gave Matt a dry mini-smile. "Okay, we're going with your gut on this, Matt. The retinal scans are inconclusive, but I had an interesting talk with Major General Selkirk. Sounds like there's reason to justify the changes in Ayala's scans."

"What about the original contract request?"

"SOUFCOM is investigating. Whoever generated the request somehow obscured their chip ID, and falsified the chip logs from both ArmySF SubCom and SOUFCOM. The report of Ayala's being alive and just out of re-education supposedly originated with the Boulder Blue cell, but no one can substantiate that. I have more you need to know, but first, *I* need to know Ayala's need-to-know."

"He's psychic. Kind of. And it was engineered by SOUF. I think it's just a Psi-force experiment." Matt kept his voice

down. James couldn't easily overhear, but Matt wasn't sure how comfortable he'd be with the info being shared. Not that Matt would be able to avoid telling James he'd shared it.

"Made escaping a little easier." Matt added when Lance just looked at him blankly.

"I bet. I might have to bring Anais in on this, Matt. Although I'm not sure it makes a difference right now."

"We think it's why his retinal scans were fucked up. They implanted some kind of sensory input organ in his head after he joined Psi-force."

Lance nodded slowly. "Okay. Here's what you need to know: We're seeing massive militia movements on the OR-ID border, especially around the Ontario, Payette, Weiser, and Hells Canyon crossing points."

"Someone leaked our routes." Matt felt a cold chill sweep through his abdomen. Gah.

"Not necessarily, Matt, although they shouldn't know where you're from, or where you're going. Your ID may be leaked—the real or the forgery—and they chose the obvious routes. You're going to have to make it up as you go, son." Lance's eyes were very grave. And worried.

Good lord, his grandfather was calling him son. It had to be bad. "There's more?"

"Are you in the Emmett area?" Lance wouldn't know, because they never reported an unsecured location in the Red unless it was an emergency. It was possible to triangulate his position from his signal, but hella hard to do in the amount of wave traffic around.

Matt swallowed. "How did you know?"

"Most RIA troop movement is heading into that area. Lots of private militia already there, but I can't tell who.

They aren’t trying to hide it, either—moving fast. They really want this guy. Your only open flank is to the north.”

Great. The arid, rugged, mountainous flank. His leg gave a preemptive twinge. “And I bet it’s only open relative to the other flanks.” He really didn’t need an answer to that.

“You’re certain about this Ayala?” Lance asked again. This time, he was just being Matt’s Grampa.

“Yes.” Matt didn’t hesitate.

Lance sighed. “One more thing. Ayala’s father was told James was MIA. This morning they sent someone to update him on Ayala’s status. His father knows about the re-education camp, now. I know he was in the closet in high school, so….”

Matt winced. “I’ll talk to him. Thanks, Grampa.”

“Check-in at your regular time tonight.” The screen went blank.

Shit. He and James had to talk. Matt put his leg back together and trotted up to the dinosaur vehicle. “See anything?”

“Lots,” James answered from under the truck. He didn’t elaborate, which Matt was okay with.

“So, we need to talk.”

“Give me the quick and dirty.”

Matt let his mind go there, for just a split second. Sex under life-threatening conditions was always hot…. “Um, they believe you’re you.” *Mostly*. “But that’s the only good news. SOUFCOM’s investigating who knew you were still alive to issue the contract request and we’ve been ratted out to the RIA, who has apparently shared the info with every private militia and wannabe in the state. They seem

to know where we are and where we're headed. Apparently, you're well-liked and no one wants to see you go."

"They find us together, they'll string us both up from the nearest tree." Probably not, actually. Probably they'd just string Matt up. James knew he was a high-value POW.

"Not a lot of trees in Idaho, anymore," Matt pointed out. James snorted. It was a new one. It sounded a little disgusted. Matt mentally filed it in his growing lexicon. Snorticon. Whatever.

"There's more. Your father was given your current status this morning, including the stint in re-education camp."

James gave Matt a blank look. "Doesn't matter."

"James—"

"Drop it, Matt. Let's just deal with now. You can bail. They aren't after you, right? Maybe you need to cover your own ass."

"I'm not leaving you here by yourself; it's not in my job description."

"I'm serious."

"So am I. We don't have time for this crap right now, James. We have to figure out how they know where we are."

"Those guys who stumbled into our camp last night are probably responsible."

"Yeah, but how'd they pick up the trail so fast on the river?"

"Pretty obvious route."

"How did they find us in Emmett?"

"Trailed us."

“You would have seen them, James.” Matt didn’t have any clue where in the hell this unwavering faith in James’s abilities came from. “To trail us, they had to keep us in sight at least occasionally. You would have picked up their intentions.” He’d started out talking out of his ass, but it made sense once he was finished.

James was silent. Then he turned to look at Matt. “Lucky guess?” He sounded far less certain now.

Matt didn’t think so. “’M gonna have to scan you for trackers, James.”

James stared a second, nodded, and got off his belly, leaning against the side of the truck.

Matt sat next to him. James gave a little shudder when he opened up his leg. “That’s just weird.”

“Thanks.” Matt glared at him.

“Sorry.” James reached out and patted his shoulder a little awkwardly. James’s touch left little tingling fingerprints on Matt’s shoulder blade.

The recoder had bad news. “You have nano-trackers.”

“You’re fucking kidding me! They would have had to inject them! When would they have done that?”

“It had to be after we left Boise. The recoder would have picked up anything systemic when I did your leg chip.”

“So, our nocturnal visitors. But I never let the fuckers near me. Even if you’d fallen asleep on watch—”

“I didn’t fucking fall asleep.”

“—I would have felt it if they even got near me. I’m not *that* out of practice. You don’t lose instincts like that in POW camp, or re-education. I even woke up when I swallowed that bug.”

“Oh.” Matt looked at him in dawning comprehension.

“Shit,” James muttered. “I didn’t swallow a bug, I swallowed a *bug*.”

Matt checked further with the recoder. The nanos were infesting James’s digestive tract. They couldn’t procreate, but they didn’t die off, either. It would take days to eliminate them all.

“We have to kill the fuckers.”

“It’s not a virus,” James snapped.

Matt only just kept himself from sticking out his tongue. “Sometimes they behave like them. Gramma Anais developed some nasty biotech nano-viruses in her day. She makes us each carry parasitic bio-nanos in case we get infected. That might kill ’em. They work better in the digestive tract than the bloodstream, anyway.”

“How come QESA has parasitic nanos and the military doesn’t?”

Matt shrugged. “Still experimental. She’s retired. She just does shit like this for fun. I’m dosing you with them.”

“That woman has a fucking weird idea of fun.”

“Yeah, no shit.” Matt pulled a titanium case out of an inner pocket of his pack then resealed it. He coded in Anais’s password. All her “creations” were password protected, and everyone kept the passwords secret on pain of death. She’d deliver on the threat too.

James paled suddenly when Matt uncapped the hypo. “A *needle*? You have to stick a *needle* in me? There’s no spray version or something less… less….”

“Penetrative?” Matt offered innocently.

“Invasive.” James substituted. “I hate needles.”

“C’mon. You got an HIV vaccine, right? That’s by needle only.”

“I was twelve. Dad had to…,” he mumbled the rest so quietly Matt couldn’t catch it.

“Huh?”

“He held me down,” James said in exasperation. And with some panic in his voice.

Matt stopped messing around with him. “James. Chill. The dose is loaded into a needle, but you have to take it orally for this, anyway. Open up.”

“Shit.” James glared then let Matt give him the nanos.

They waited a few minutes. Then Matt started tracking progress with the recoder. “Your nano load is dropping.”

“Good.” James still sounded a little pissed. They didn’t talk; Matt just occasionally swept him with the recoder. He slipped an arm around the back of James to check his kidneys.

“James, you have blood on the back of your shirt, I think.” It wasn’t always easy to see on the black all-weathers, but Matt had seen enough blood to pick it up. “Take off your shirt and let me look.”

“Is that a line?” James raised an eyebrow at him.

Apparently he wasn’t annoyed anymore. Matt grinned. “No.”

James whipped his shirt off over his head.

Mmmmm. Nice, muscley chest. He may not have been working out regularly since being captured, but he got something done.

Matt flicked his eyes over all the newly exposed skin, cataloging it quickly. James had lost some definition in his abs, maybe. It would be a stretch to say he had a six-pack, but he definitely had abs. His shoulders and pecs, though, they were defined and large, the kind of beefy, dense strong-man muscles that were the opposite of the wiry

leanness Matt always managed. And the light-gold hair dusting between his nipples and down the center of his chest to his abdomen—and treasure trail, incidentally—was a nice touch. Matt got lost, visually tracing James's clavicle, getting hung up where it disappeared into the deltoid.

"Isn't it on my back?" Matt jerked and pushed the recoder into James's kidney. It made one of his pecs flinch. Matt turned away quickly to adjust himself, and put the recoder down.

"It's barely a scratch. I'll put some topical on it." And rub up on James's skin in the process.

James's skin was awesome. That tawny color, a little sweaty from the daytime heat and the running-for-their-lives thing. Smooth, but not soft. It had texture.

Matt tried to keep his fingers only to the necessary spots, but he might have strayed just a tiny bit. James held perfectly still. Frozen. Matt dropped his hand. Then he picked up the recoder again to keep his fingers busy with something other than touching all that nice skin.

James put his shirt back on, silently.

"Am I still infested?" It seemed like they'd been sitting in this charged silence a long time. The sun was kind of warm, and it was strangely peaceful, in spite of the danger.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, the trackers. Give me a minute to recalibrate the recoder…. Ha! Recalibrate the recoder," Matt muttered to himself, fingers flying on the touch screen.

"You find yourself very amusing, don't you?" Matt was funny, in a cute way. A cute, smartass way.

Matt's fingers stilled a second, then resumed, moving more slowly and carefully. "Yep, I do. Gotta get your fun somewhere, don't you?" He sounded more curious than anything, with maybe a bit of defensiveness.

"Yeah, I guess you aren't getting it from me. I'm not exactly Mr. Playful."

Now Matt looked up. Screening those blue eyes with his eyelashes again. Unintentionally, James thought. "You haven't had a lot of reason to be playing, James."

"Neither have you."

Matt shrugged and looked back down at the recoder. "Until three days ago, I was hanging out at the beach in lovely Blue Oregon. Not walking around with a pink triangle on my chest. Besides, you're still interesting." He glanced quickly up and down again.

"You think I'm interesting?" Good lord, what was he? An adolescent girl? "Thanks." James rolled his eyes at himself as soon as Matt looked down again.

Matt flashed a full-on grin. "You're welcome," was all he said, though. James watched his long fingers in silence. He wanted those fingers on his chest and tracing his abdominal muscles. He could almost feel one playing with the trail of hair below his navel. Unsealing his fly, running one finger lightly down his—

"So. You're pretty much clean. Maybe fifteen minutes and we're safe to move."

James grunted. It was the most intelligent thing he could think of to say. Matt looked at him sharply.

"What?"

"That grunt. You snort all the time, but I've never heard you grunt."

He grunted because Matt had pulled him out of fantasy sex. With Matt. “I didn’t grunt. Is this a conversation we need to have right now?”

Matt looked irked. “Fine. Guess we’ll make a plan for hauling ass outta here. North sounds like our only option.” Matt bent his head over the recoder. His fingers flew again, but this time James didn’t get caught up in the erotic possibilities.

He was far too busy thinking about how to get them the hell outta there as fast as possible. Just far enough to get them safe. Then he could hand over the reins of the rescue to Matt again. James didn’t want to step on his toes. He looked at Matt’s face, set in concentration, bent toward the recoder. The guy was good at this; he didn’t want to make Matt feel like James thought he wasn’t.

He’d screwed Matt over in high school because of his own personal issues. He didn’t want his encore to be getting Matt killed or imprisoned. And he might like to get back the friendship they’d been building seven years ago, while he was at it. That would have to be Matt’s call, though.

THEY’D “parked” the truck in a brushy gully. It wouldn’t be easily seen, even by air, but it could be tracked on the ground. Pavement was nonexistent out here. Then they’d found a running stream they could slosh west in. James’s tracking nanos were all dead by then. He’d been trying to suppress the signals with his brain waves, but he couldn’t do that and other things at the same time. Like walking. Or breathing. Lunch had been tasteless nutritional nuggets eaten as they went.

James was on point, now, where before he had been in the rear coming out of Emmett and up the river. Matt interpreted it as James's instinctive need to place himself between a threat and his companion. Whoever the companion may be.

He'd seen it with his various family members hundreds of times. Hunting season was like a Special Forces clown show. When he saw his dad's hydrogen utility coming up toward the hunting camp in Lost Valley, he always expected sixteen soldiers to fall out yelling deployment orders to one another. Then, of course, getting pissed off at one another and starting to beat one another into the ground. Anais was notoriously brutal. Once his cousin Conner had claimed, "She has no sense of honor," while holding a cold pack against his neck. He learned all about honor after that comment.

It was the best argument out there for rigidly enforced chain of command and conduct codes.

"You hunt deer when you were growing up?" Matt asked James.

"Not much. Dad wouldn't stock them. Never had spare pasture. And never had a bio-efficient breed of cattle anyway."

"We did, every year. Still do. Dad and his sister have a parcel they stock with deer and wild turkey. 'S fun."

"Lost Valley, yeah? Steve mentioned it."

Well, that pretty much killed the conversation. Except Matt realized he felt like poking the sleeping lion. "You never knew Steve was gay, huh? Not surprising, since he was totally in the closet."

James stopped so abruptly he almost fell over. Matt kept an eye on the rigid set of his shoulders.

“Yeah, lots of people were. Still are.” Then James started moving again.

What the hell did that mean? “I sure as hell wasn’t.”

James snorted. *Duh.* “Wasn’t talking about you.”

Matt wished James would look at him, so he could get a read on his expression. Although the snorting was nearly as illuminating as his face was. Or more. “Who were you talking about?” Like he didn’t know.

This time James did stop and turn around, giving him a look that was both wry and self-deprecating at once. “C’mon, Matt. I told you I’m gay.”

Well, yeah. “Why were you in the closet?”

“Pop.” James said shortly.

Matt decided maybe it was best to leave him alone for now. He went for the classic gambit—change the subject. “We looking for a place to stop, yet?” Just then, he felt a strange, bone-deep (if he’d still had one) vibration in his leg. “We’d better, I’m getting pinged.” The pinging stopped.

James stopped again and turned to look at him. “What’s the SOP for pinging at QESA?”

“Only in extreme circumstances.” It was highly unusual to be pinged.

“Shit,” James grumbled. He blew out an annoyed breath. “I saw some caves a kilometer back.”

How the hell…? Matt hadn’t seen shit, and he’d been looking.

They headed back the way they’d come. James took point. Matt smirked to himself. If he didn’t know better, he’d think the protective bastard had a crush on him. He just might let him do something about that.

James wasn’t precisely good-looking. He had a broad, sort of flat nose, which made his already broad face kinda,

well, broad. He was on the short side of average, not any taller than Matt himself—couldn't be more than 175 centimeters. But he was broad (there was that word again) in the shoulders and chest, where it did the most for Matt's libido. And his quads and glutes made Matt salivate. Matt flashed back to the night before, watching James crouched at the campsite, going through the MRE pack, his camos pulling tight across his ass and thighs.

Suddenly, Matt's leg thrummed again, constantly, but with varying intensity. *What the hell is that*? It seemed vaguely familiar, and Matt had a very bad feeling that when he remembered what it was it was going to be a very bad thing….

"Fuck! James, we might be about to have company." Matt got out his pistol, though it was next to useless against robotic aircraft.

"I didn't sense anything."

"SAIA," Matt said shortly over his shoulder. Stealth AI Aircraft.

"You have a sensor for that?" James sounded incredulous.

"Not unless you count my leg." SAIA was stealth except for one little thing. When it was in rotor-wing mode, it produced a percussive *whump-whump-whump*. It had been designed away, mostly, but delicate sensors could pick it up. Or hollow, titanium shell leg prostheses, apparently. Which was good, because the delicate sensors were too, well, delicate for Matt to carry one.

"We need a cave or something. It's going to have infrared."

"I *know*." Did James think he was stupid? "Do you *see* a cave or something? That thing is nearby, James, if I'm picking it up."

“We’ll head upstream to that overhang and get under the digi-camo.” James indicated a spot where the streambed ran under a small cliff and had undercut the bank. The clearance was less than 1.5 meters.

They couldn’t see or hear anything, but the possibility of meeting up with a heavily armed, highly maneuverable flying robot focused Matt’s instincts. High-stress situations always brought clarity. Everything was evaluated based on its potential to increase or decrease the likelihood of survival. It was like having wide-angle tunnel vision.

As they got within five meters of the overhang, Matt began to feel the strange percussive vibrations in his chest. Too close to easily escape. James had to be feeling it, too, by now.

James was almost there, already wrestling with his pack for the digi-camo when the SAIA bird came around the upstream bend in the gully. Matt’s leg started thrumming almost audibly, a sensor signaling he was being targeted. He barely had time to react to the alarm—only enough of a reaction to keep him from getting killed.

Neutral particle rounds hit his left shoulder and upper arm and knocked him off his feet. He landed on his ass in the water, half sitting up and staring straight at the bird. His leg sensor started scream-thrumming again. He looked into his attacker’s emotionless eyes. Except they weren’t eyes, just lifeless optical intake portals for the AI that was targeting him.

That’s when it occurred to Matt that getting killed by another human—or just anything sentient, please—was preferable to being executed by a machine. Maybe in his next life he’d hope for that. It looked like his next life might be coming up real soon.

Just before the bird took the killing shot, James knocked him into the stream and he tried to breathe water.

Then the pain from his shoulder hitting rock made him scream out all that water, and some air he probably could have used. His vision went black and white, narrowing into a tunnel, then just a pinprick, then just went *pop* and disappeared, taking his consciousness with it.

—CHAPTER 10—

His shoulder was on fire, and *thank God* someone was putting it out. He could feel cool liquid spreading over his shoulder and arm. Was it gel? It moved so slowly. Water didn't move that slowly; it must be gel. Why was his shoulder on fire in the first place? It must be fire. He could smell the smoke. Ugh. Who knew humans smelled like burning polymers? He'd heard they smelled like pork. Or maybe that was tasted like pork.

"You comin' round, buddy?" asked a rough voice. Matt scrunched his eyes. Either trying to open them or keep them closed, he wasn't sure which.

"Matt?" There was a hand on his face. It felt good. Rough and calloused and so warm. Damn, he was kinda cold. And wet. Because the guy attached to the hand put out the fire with water?

"Why was I on fire?"

The snort he got in response brought some details back. James. Matt's eyes popped open.

"You weren't on fire."

"What's all the smoke from?" He could see it now, dark gray and wispy, but no large column. It had a very chemical smell Matt couldn't quite place. "What was burning?"

"The SAIA that got you."

Oh. That thing. Matt shuddered a little. James moved his hand, gripping the back of Matt's neck, his thumb resting on his jaw. "Fuck. Thought it was gonna kill me."

"Nearly did, I think." James's voice sounded weird. "You were bleeding out pretty bad."

Gah. "I wasn't burning?"

"No. Took two particle bolts."

"Pressure patches?"

"They're on. 'S fine, Matt. Don't sweat it."

"Don' feel anything." Matt closed his eyes for a little rest. "Kinda woozy."

"Matt, listen to me. I dosed your shoulder with a local numbing agent, and gave you some painkillers. Not enough to knock you out, not yet. You gotta stay with me a little longer."

"Why?" he whined. James could deal with this. He was Psi-force. Could even pack him out. He was up to the job. Matt wasn't right now. Soon, but he needed a half hour. Or four.

"We need to get to those caves and call in to QESA. They pinged you, remember?"

"They never ping me."

"They did this time. Before the SAIA attacked, remember?"

"No. Sorta."

For a second, James gripped him tighter. He said something under his breath that Matt didn't catch. He thought he heard James call someone "babe," though. Was he thinking about his lover? The one from POW camp? That pissed Matt off. Now he *really* wasn't walking. Let the horny, lovesick bastard carry him.

“I’ll carry you,” James echoed his thoughts. Well, one of them. Suddenly there was a shoulder in his abdomen and then he was flying through the air.

“Gaaaahh.” He was gonna puke. Except his head settled a little, and his stomach caught up with his body. For a second he’d been sure James left it behind.

Matt cracked his eyes a little as James started to move. He was staring right down at James’s very fine ass. Such a hot ass.

James gave a choking snort. Or maybe he just choked. Matt puzzled it out. “Did I say that out loud?” James snorted again, but this time it sounded more snorty than chokey.

Must be a “yes.”

Matt drifted along on James’s shoulder, watching his arms flop and bounce around James’s flexing ass. There was a slow trickle of blood dripping down his left arm, onto his hand, and occasionally dropping off his thumb. Mostly it was hitting the ground, but occasionally the back of James’s camos would get hit.

“Think we’re leavin’ trail.”

“What?” James was huffing a little. Outta-shape bastard. Matt was barely 70 kilos.

“You’re outta shape, boy. Breathin’ hard.”

“I’m hauling your loopy ass around, that’s why. What did you mean about leaving a trail?”

“’M bleedin’.”

“Bad?” James sounded alarmed.

“Nope. Jus’ a little. Drippin’ on the groun’, sometimes.”

“Shit!” James stopped, and Matt could feel him shift his hold a little in order to put him down. His big hand was

on Matt’s ass now, which was just as pleasant as having it on his neck, but in a totally different way.

“No!” Matt said when James started to bend. He stopped. “Can fix it.”

“How the hell are you going to fix it, Matt?”

“Somebody’s pissy today,” he sang out.

“Matt.” James sounded like he was talking through his teeth. “I’m putting you down so we can stop the bleeding.”

“No! No, ’s okay. Can do it.” Then Matt shoved his left hand into the back of James’s waistband. He could drip on James instead of the ground. “See?”

James was perfectly still for a few seconds. “Lovely,” he said, still sounding like his teeth were clenched. He started walking again.

Some people just didn’t know how to have any fun.

“James?” Matt asked after a few minutes.

James sighed. Loudly. “Yeah?”

“D’you know we’re goin’ upstream?”

“That’s the way to the caves.”

“Isn’ tha’ the way the bird came from?”

“Calculated risk, Matt. Gotta do it.”

Matt thought a second. Or thirty. “Wha’s the calc’lation?”

Another, louder sigh. “I bet they sent a SAIA bird down each drainage radiating out from where we left the vehicle. We should have time to make it to the caves before we run into anything coming to check on the bird, after it doesn’t report in. And I don’t know what the hell’s downstream or cross country.”

“Oh. Huh.” Whatever he said.

“Why don’t you take a little rest, Matt?” Suddenly, James’s voice just sounded so much nicer. Like he really cared about Matt’s comfort. Matt blinked his eyes against sudden tears.

“Think I will,” he mumbled.

JAMES finished administering the drugs Matt’s Gramma Anais had ordered him to while she finished her instructions. Her calculation on the stimulant had been a little off, but he wasn’t about to tell her that.

“You need to run Matt’s vid program 326B.d. Make your way to the person and location indicated. They’ll give you help, and their communication lines are more secure than yours. Don’t check in again until you’re there or three days from now at 1930, whichever comes first. Now move out. And if you let anything further happen to Matt, I will make myself a purse from your scrotum.” Matt was beginning to stir, again, and James held the hookup so they could see.

“Yes, Colonel Viteaux. Understood, ma’am.” James snapped out a salute to the woman. She may be retired, but he was taking no chance of offending her. She scared the holy living shit out of him.

James only got one more look at Lieutenant Colonel Lance Kell-Viteaux, his mouth twisted in worry, before Colonel Viteaux cut the transmission.

He got the feeling Matt’s family didn’t like him very much.

They certainly weren’t happy with the current situation, and neither of them had entirely believed his account of how he’d destroyed the SAIA bird attacking

them. He didn’t really blame them. He couldn’t quite figure it out himself.

The shotgun did fuck-all to the bird, of course. He knew Matt was about to get drilled in the head, and he leapt in desperation, shouting “No!” and pushing the command out mentally without thinking. He took Matt down, waiting to feel the hit on his own body, but there was nothing.

Well, nothing except the bird exploded, crashed and burned. It definitely exploded first. James turned his head after the shock wave passed and watched the burning SAIA hit the ground.

It wasn’t a big explosion, which was fortunate considering their proximity. It was more like he’d triggered internal small explosions with his mental command. An incomplete self-destruct.

Who knew he could do that?

Shit. He buried his face in his palms, gripping his hair tightly in his fingers. What the *fuck* was going on with his head? He forcibly put the issue aside and took stock of the situation, instead. He needed to plunder Matt’s leg again—*shudder*—and get them ready to move out at nightfall. Matt must have some NV tech. Even ancient stuff was better than none. Best-case scenario, he had NV contact lenses.

He looked down at Matt’s calf, left open after removing the vid hookup. Matt had sleepily told him to leave it that way. James fought off chills again. He hated seeing Matt’s leg like that.

“Matty.” James shook him gently, gripping his right knee above the “tech pantry.” Matt flailed a little.

“Huh?” He lifted his head and blinked blearily at James. It *was* possible James had overdosed him before, but at least Matt wasn’t in tons of pain. “Gonna call Grampa?”

“Already did. You said hi to him and your, um, Gramma, remember?”

Matt groaned and dropped his head back on his pack. “No.” He barely kept his eyes open. “What’d they say?”

“They pinged because satellite recon showed Mountain Home was scrambling SAIA,” James said dryly.

Matt made a face. “Figured that one out already.”

“Yeah. Well, Colonel Viteaux has a bolt-hole for us. We’re headed there once I listen to vid 326B.d.”

Matt snickered. “Colonel Viteaux. You sound like all the other soldiers she intimidates. She’s retired, for fuck’s sake.”

“The woman threatened my testicles. I’m happy to call her Colonel Viteaux.”

Matt got quiet again. He looked at James thoughtfully, if a little cross-eyed. “Maybe you should go ahead without me. You can come back for me.”

“Th’fuck, Matt? You *want* me to lose my nuts? We’re within two thousand meters of where a SAIA bird self-destructed, and as soon as they read the black box, they’ll know we were here and you’re wounded. No fucking way I’m leaving you here.”

“’K. I get ya. It’d be stupid. Keep your nuts. Pain’s coming back, need more numb stuff, or ’m gonna use up all m’energy fighting the pain. Won’t be able to walk.”

“Can’t numb it. Your choice is have some pain and walk under your own power—mostly—or be sedated.”

“And what, your macho ass carries me?” Matt was getting livelier. The new drugs were working, quicker than James had anticipated.

“Well, my ass thanks you for the compliments, but I thought I’d pack you out over my shoulder.” James grinned.

He didn’t get quite the response he expected.

MATT gaped at James. “Now you decided to be Mr. Playful? *Now*?”

James slowly lost his grin and ducked his head. He cleared his throat. “Stress makes me weird sometimes, I guess.” Matt could see his cheeks reddening.

Now he topped it off with being fucking cute? Matt shook his head. “You’re not packing me outta here,” he snapped. Even *if* Matt would enjoy James carrying him. Just maybe not when he was unconscious.

“I’m not numbing you up, either,” James snapped back.

Matt knew it was a bad idea, and if he was playing medic and not patient, he’d say the same thing. “I *know*,” he shot back. This guy just brought out the ten-year-old in him. “Nasty bastard,” he muttered. Judging by James’s patronizing, disgusted snort, he’d not been that quiet.

“Did you give me nano-menders?” He couldn’t stop the surly, apparently. But he was playing patient. Surly was a requirement for the role.

James gave another small snort—*“I’m being very patient with you, and I want you to know it.”* “Yes, just like Colonel Viteaux said to.” He added something else in a mumble Matt didn’t pick up.

“What?” he demanded.

“I *said*, ‘I gave you a mild stimulant too, like she told me.’”

“Ah.” Matt nodded at him smugly. “In other words, you overdosed me earlier.” Dosages were determined by weight, so James must have overestimated his. Wait a minute…. “Are you saying I’m fat?”

James gave another snort—*“I’ve all but lost my patience with you”*—and rolled his eyes. He looked at Matt and opened his mouth to retort, but then his expression changed. He looked a little assessing, and a lot concerned.

“Matt, I think maybe it’s time to give you more painkillers.” James sounded almost soothing.

“Why?” Matt was suspicious. And he wasn’t about to forget the fat issue.

“I think maybe I gave you too much of the stimulant Colonel Viteaux told me to give you. Your pupils are huge.” A slow smile broke across James’s face, momentarily dazzling Matt. “Maybe she thought you were fat, too.” He got up and started rummaging in Matt’s pack.

“*What?*” Matt tried to twist around and look at James, but his injured shoulder was making it impossible. Suddenly, a big hand grabbed his forehead and forced his head back onto James’s hard thigh. Then James shoved the hypo-mister up his nose and dosed his sinuses.

“Gah!” Matt kicked and flailed ineffectively. “Bastard!”

Within a minute Matt began to relax, tension seeping out of his body.

CAUTIOUSLY, James lifted his hands off Matt’s face. Matt relaxed further into James’s leg.

“Jesus,” Matt sighed after a few minutes. “That was fugly. Sorry.” He kept his eyes closed.

James put his diplomatic training to use and refrained from agreeing. He wasn’t up to disagreeing, though. Matt’s pupils had begun to shrink, James saw when Matt finally opened his eyes. James relaxed a little too. Matt’s eyelids

began to look heavy again. God, James just couldn't get these doses right.

"I should probably tell you I'm very sensitive to drugs."

James rolled his eyes again. "Yeah, I was figuring that out." Guess he shouldn't have increased the dose Colonel Viteaux had indicated for the stimulant.

Matt didn't move off James's thigh, and James was content to let him rest there. Matt stretched out along the dirt and rock littering the cave floor, long and lean. He turned his head a little and nuzzled his ear into James's thigh, making little contented noises in his throat. James was pretty sure he didn't realize it.

Matt turned his body to the side, curling up a little and nuzzling James with his cheek, now. Tentatively, James moved one hand back to Matt's head and stroked his hair gently. Matt nuzzled into James's hand now too.

"Mmmmmm, feels good," Matt slurred sleepily.

From one extreme to the other. James ran his fingers through Matt's hair over and over, just watching his squared-off, tanned hands run through Matt's light hair. It was just long enough to fall silkily between James's fingers. Which was just enough stimulation for him to begin feeling his heartbeat in his cock.

A soft snore from Matt startled James out of his reverie.

Damn, he'd overdosed him again.

Instead of getting up, like he should, James kept looking at Matt. He looked peaceful. James shouldn't disturb him. Moving might wake him again. Just a couple more minutes, then Matt'd be out enough….

Matt wasn't any shorter than James, but James thought of him as sort of a small guy, because he was so wiry and sleek. Matt's personality was much bigger than that,

though. Where James thought of himself as boring and stoic, Matt was animated and mischievous. He was dependable, sure, but he was vital.

And sensual.

James didn't know, but he liked to imagine Matt was a complete hedonist in bed. James always had a hard time going with the flow, and he found men who could completely wallow in pleasure a huge turn-on. He'd bet Matt was a guy like that. A guy who didn't need to be in control.

Without really thinking about it, James unsealed Matt's shirt. Earlier, with blood everywhere and frantically applying pressure patches, he hadn't had time to look, or even think about looking. But he wanted to.

Matt's chest was smooth and the skin there was much paler than on his face and arms. The only hair was a dark-blond happy trail, below his navel.

Matt had to have the sexiest nipples James had ever seen on a guy. They were large and pink, just hanging on to the bottom of Matt's pecs. Like they were about to drip off. James skated one fingertip lightly over one. God. Hard. He only just managed to make himself move his finger off.

He distracted himself by looking lower. Some distraction. Matt had beautiful abs. Even resting, they stacked in well-defined furrows. James's fingers shook the tiniest bit as he forced himself to reseal Matt's shirt before he got too handsy.

Christ, he was perving on a wounded guy. A guy he'd drugged into unconsciousness, even. He was an object lesson for whom not to date.

James's dick throbbed anyway, uncaring about sexual ethics. For just a second, he almost let himself unseal Matt's shirt again and jerk off until he came all over Matt's

chest. He'd lick it off when he was done. You know, clean the guy up a little.

James shook his head, hard. He'd let this get way out of control. He closed his eyes resolutely and pictured Colonel Anais Viteaux. His cock withered.

He needed to put a new shirt on Matt, but he was afraid of getting carried away again. Gently James picked Matt's head up, shoved his pack underneath, and let him rest.

IT WAS two hours before nightfall—an hour and forty-eight minutes since Matt was wounded—when James sensed someone nearby, searching for them. A male someone, felt like. Coming up from the creek bed. Someone and… some*thing*.

Could it be a dog? It was an animal, he was sure. Fuck. Neutralizing an enemy wasn't a problem for him, but killing a dog? That bit. Especially now, when he could sort of feel their joy in doing a job, and their blind loyalty to their owners (well, usually). He'd already had to kill a couple of dogs today, and it'd filled his quota for the year.

This felt a little different, though. More like frustrated patience with its human.

Maybe not a dog. Whatever it was, they were maybe a thousand meters away, James thought. There was scree and sparse grass all around the front of the cave they sheltered in. The stream was about fifteen hundred meters away, around a curving, steep cliff face. Their particular cave couldn't be seen from the stream, but if the guy kept looking through all the caves he would find them. And of course, he would.

Matt was drifting in and out of consciousness on the cave floor. “Matt,” James murmured.

“Huh?” His voice was barely above a whisper.

“Going out to check on something.” Matt opened his eyes. He stared at James a second then pushed himself upright, his pack against the small of his back. He nodded wordlessly.

James cloaked himself in the digi-camo and slipped out onto the path in front of their shelter. It was an old deer trail, coming up from the steam bed. It was the only approach for whoever was hunting them.

He found a boulder not too far away from the path that looked like it wasn’t big enough to hide a human. Unless the human was facedown in the dirt and covered in digi-camo. Even nearly prone, James could see a good five hundred meters down the trail.

James concentrated on sending soothing thoughts out to the animal. He was sure animals picked up brain waves from all humans. It wouldn’t hurt to try, and it would help James concentrate on their approach.

He nearly slapped himself on the forehead when their searcher came around the cliff on a horse. Of course it was a horse. And the guy was Red Idaho Mounted Police. The cheap knockoff of the RCMP. Once Idaho had privatized and opened national forests and parks, RIMPs became necessary to keep up with the increasingly nomadic poor population.

It was seriously unlikely the mountie had a partner, especially if the RIA militia had pulled this guy off regular patrol and sent him here for a look-see.

Picking the guy off the horse was easy. James let them pass, then crept up behind the horse silently and pulled the mountie off. “What the—?” James cut off his air and shout,

twisting his neck in a practiced move. The mountie's neck snapped, and he went limp in James's arms almost immediately. The horse barely shied away. He'd tried to keep a line of mental communication open with her right up until he snapped her master's neck. She looked at him curiously when he dropped the body.

While the mare nosed the body—not particularly concerned, it seemed—James ransacked the officer methodically. Two RIA com sets (excellent), NV lenses (bonus), various electronic survival and tracking gadgets (meh), but best of all was the semiautomatic DEW rifle. A sniper's rifle and a good all-purpose weapon. Jesus, it beat his shotgun all to shit. Not that he'd be getting rid of that.

The mare carried cooking equipment, a small shelter, food, survival gear, and NV lenses for her, which was a pleasant surprise. James looked at the mountie's body. Coyotes and other scavengers would take care of it pretty quickly if he left it, but not fast enough. He'd have to cart it somewhere more remote.

James used Matt's recoder to locate the mare's chip, and then to deactivate it. He removed all the tack he could that identified her as RIMP property.

Finally, he threw the body over the horse's withers and packed it into the brush, maybe two thousand yards from the caves into a deep drainage. He left the unnecessary tack and cooking equipment with the body. By the time he got back, it was almost dark.

Time to get Matt and get the hell out of there.

MATT was mostly alert when James returned with the mare. Alert enough to have concealed himself next to the entrance and be pointing his pistol at James.

“Glad you came back for me,” he joked nervously, removing his thumb from the safety override.

James stared at him. “Your Gramma Anais would *torture* me if I left you here.”

Matt was the tiniest bit hurt. He scowled at James, who looked baffled. Matt rolled his eyes. Fucking painkillers, turning him into a girl. This emotional byplay was getting as confusing as an actual relationship.

“Well, just as long as you’re not coming back ’cause you like me.” Matt was trying for wry, but it came out sarcastic.

James looked even more confused. “Of course I like you. You couldn’t tell?” Then he went red. Instantly, neck to hairline. It was cute. “I mean, I guess I thought I’d been kinda… obvious.”

It was Matt’s turn to stare. Had anyone else ever seen *this* James before? “James. I’m a guy, you’re a guy. We may be gay guys, but emotional cues are still something of a foreign language. I mean, I thought you might wanna fuck me, but….” He trailed off, eyebrows raised.

“Oh, hell yes,” James said roughly. Then he grabbed Matt’s wrist and reeled him in.

Matt didn’t really have any time to process what was happening before James was kissing him. He held Matt’s wrist and pistol awkwardly squashed between their bodies. His lips were chapped, and he had stubble. And he was rubbing all that roughness against Matt’s lips, tickling them in the most erotic way. James kept brushing their lips together, barely touching him.

Matt struggled to get his arm out from between them. James started to step back, thinking Matt was pushing him away. Matt snaked his arm behind James’s neck, grabbing

his nape and bringing James's mouth back to his, banging the pistol against the back of James's head.

Matt sealed his lips over James's and forced his way in. James gave him a little groan. Matt pushed up against him harder, rubbing their tongues together and twisting his around James's. He gave another, louder groan and then he was kissing Matt back aggressively, reaching around his waist, taking control.

Matt reached up with his left arm for James's shoulders, and the pain brought him up short. "Fuck!" he hissed.

"Shit!" James yelped and stepped back, gripping Matt's waist in his hands. "Fuck, did I hurt you? What'd I do? God, Matt, sorry. I just got carried away—"

"Don't, James." Matt slapped his hand—the right one—against James's mouth, the pistol bumping his cheek. "I did it to myself."

James stared into his eyes for a minute. Then he said something, but it was muffled.

"What?" Matt removed his hand.

"Maybe this isn't the best time for this anyway. But I'd really like to do it again, later." He leaned forward and gave Matt another teasing kiss. Matt tried to follow James's lips with his own, but James's hands on his waist stopped him. He growled a little. James smiled. And gave an "aren't you cute" snort.

Gah. Big sap.

Matt let out a big breath and stepped away. "Later," he said, looking James in the eye, so he'd know how serious Matt was. James's smile grew.

"Oh, hell yes."

—CHAPTER 11—

"WHERE'D we get a horse?" Matt stood looking at the mare.

"She was donated to the cause by a mountie. So, think you're up to it?"

Matt gave James a calculating look. "Who's got the bitch seat?"

"Um, I actually thought you might be safer in front of me."

"In front of the saddle?" He'd never fit there.

"'S one of the new bareback-grip saddles."

"So, I getta operate the beast?"

James snorted. "Definitely not, when you talk like that. How did you grow up on a ranch and not know how to ride a horse?"

"I *know* how to ride a horse. I was being funny."

"Not laughing."

Matt gave a little growl then started toward the horse. He stumbled over a rock, and James caught his arm to steady him. Matt sighed. "Fucking painkillers," he muttered. He slipped out of James's grasp and walked more carefully toward the mare. "You couldn't have found *two* mounties? Or one with two horses?"

Predictably, James snorted. "You aren't up to operating a beast. You're a one-armed man, for at least another day,

and that's only if the wound isn't that bad and the nano-menders work perfectly. You're also drugged up."

"Didn't stop you from jumping me." Matt turned and looked at James when he got no response. James's face was red, and he was kicking the dirt and running a hand through his hair. Awww, cute.

"'S different," James finally said, still looking at the ground. He could really work bashful country boy and make it look *good*.

Matt stifled his laugh and tried to work some surly into his tone. "How's it different?"

"You wanted it." James looked up into his eyes. Fuck, he was hot when he did that bold thing too. Fuck, he was just hot.

"Want to ride my own horse too."

"You can't ride a horse. 'Sides, this way you can sleep and get better faster."

"How'm I gonna sleep riding a horse?"

"You can lean on me. I'll hold onto you, make sure you don't fall off." James was still red, but Matt thought maybe James wanted that, wanted Matt against him.

And man, did Matt want it too. He suppressed a little shiver. "I could do that," he murmured, holding James's eyes. Matt watched James's Adam's apple bob up and down as he swallowed.

"Yeah." His voice was rough.

"We're a long ways from high school, here, aren't we, James?"

"Yeah. Thank fuck."

“Did you look at the emergency plan vid? You seem to have some idea where we’re going.” Matt knew he was off his game if it took until now for him to remember to ask.

“We’re going to an RCC convent outside of Cambridge. When we get there we ask for Sister Immaculata, aka my Great-Aunt Pearl Hessia.”

“There’s a Blue agent in a Roman Catholic Church convent?” News to Matt.

He could feel James shrug, pressed up against him lightly. “Guess so.”

The moon was on its last quarter, and they were moving along pretty fast, riding cross-country, up and down the drainages. They’d started out heading northeast, but changed course when they found a creek running west. Now they were heading north again. Matt was just glad it was the horse walking, and not him.

The mare had her NV lenses on, which she took with surprising ease. She was strong and built for endurance more than speed. She was much friendlier than Matt had expected. He thought officers’ horses were supposedly attached to their human partner. When he’d mentioned it to James, he’d frowned and said, “I think she was new. Or that officer was new to her. She seems to like us more than him. He wasn’t… affectionate, maybe, with her.”

“James, can you talk to the horse?” Matt teased. He could almost hear James blush.

James cleared his throat. “Kinda.”

“James, were you particularly affectionate with this horse?” He could barely keep from laughing.

“Might have given her a sugar cube. They were in the saddlebag. And, you know, talked to her a little. And, um, I give her little, soothing nudges sometimes.”

“Whadya mean, ‘nudges’?”

“You know.”

“No, James, I don’t know.” James made a rumbling noise in his chest. Was that an answer? “What?”

“I send her soothing thoughts.” James said more clearly.

“Oh. Those nudges.” Better the horse than him. “That’s nice to do for her.” James cleared his throat uncomfortably. They fell silent. Matt knew James was trying to scan for brain waves as they went, and he should shut up so James could concentrate. He was feeling sleepy anyway, and James had said he should rest. Slowly, Matt’s eyes drifted shut.

When he jerked awake a few seconds later, James had an arm around his middle and was guiding Matt to lean against his chest. “’M’okay,” Matt protested, sitting up again.

“You’re falling asleep. I’m trying to keep you from falling off.”

“Not falling asleep. Jus’ resting.”

“Took a lot today, Matt, ’s’okay to be tired. The nano-menders are taking a toll too. Using up your body’s reserves to heal you.”

Matt was too sleepy to point out that yes, he *knew* that. “Should stay ’wake. ’S’you can focus on scanning or whatever.”

“’S fine, Matt. We’ll be fine.” James sounded so sure.

“How d’you know?”

“Lots of other times I’ve picked up brain waves when I’m not searching for them. It’ll really stand out here, where there aren’t any people.”

“What about SAIA?” The thought woke him up a little. Matt suppressed a shudder.

“That’s your job. Your leg’ll wake you up?”

“If there’s a rotor-wing nearby.” He couldn’t imagine ever sleeping through that again.

“’K, Matt. Then sleep.” Finally Matt let James guide him back against his chest. He pulled Matt tighter against his body, his chest pressing against Matt’s back.

Oh, yeah, *that* was going to make sleep easier. Matt could feel James’s breath in his ear, hot and moist, tickling a little. Matt whimpered. James chuckled quietly, and brought Matt’s lower back in even closer with that strong arm wrapped around him. Matt could feel his ass almost resting in James’s pelvis. He wiggled back just a little. James’s breath caught, and there was no more chuckling.

His rough voice spoke in Matt’s ear. “Matty, you need to rest. Don’t want you getting worse, and I didn’t see how bad things were in the first place.”

“Why do you call me that? And you’re the one pressing me up against you.”

“Call you what?” James didn’t loosen his grip any.

“Matty.”

“Oh. Sorry, I didn’t realize I did that.”

“’S okay. Kinda like it.” But no one else was calling him that. Matt shifted against James a little. He really was exhausted. “Can’t put my head back; your shoulder’s too low.”

James loosened his arm so Matt could scoot his butt forward and slouch down. Now his shoulder blades were butting against James’s pecs. His head was on James’s shoulder, and he couldn’t stop himself from turning his face into James’s neck.

Damn, he had it bad. This probably wasn’t smart, but it felt sooooo good. Comforting and warm. Matt sighed. He

wrestled with himself a little. James seemed like a good guy now, but he'd seemed like a good guy for a brief period seven years ago. Who's to say he wouldn't turn on Matt again?

But maybe he wouldn't. And right now, he was making Matt feel hypersensitive and hyper-relaxed at the same time. Languorous. And desirable. James's fingers on his waist were gently stroking him, light movements that Matt thought James didn't realize he was making. And did he just rub his stubbly chin against Matt's hair?

This was a bad idea. Matt knew he was into this guy for far more than a quick (or a languid) fuck. He'd definitely had a thing for James in high school, and it had taken about .6 seconds for said thing to come roaring back once he ran into James again. About as long as it took James to jump out a Sorpacter chute and land on him, actually. Matt hadn't even made James apologize. He *had* apologized, but Matt hadn't demanded it.

Personal experience would argue that Matt was going to let James take him for a ride if he wanted to. And not just the happy, ride-'em-cowboy kind of ride. The tequila-and-cigarettes-wake-up-next-to-a-stranger kind of ride.

Didn't matter. Matt knew what he was going to do. He never had been able to talk himself out of immediate pleasure by pointing out the possible long-term negative consequences.

He was going to let James seduce him. And then once James left Matt would go out with his cousins Sabine and/or Millie and they'd get him drunk, let him smoke until he puked, and then find him a convenient stud for a quick, emotionless servicing. That he wouldn't remember in the morning (please).

Matt fell asleep, thinking about all the reasons why that was a good idea.

At 0400, James stopped to re-administer the painkiller to Matt, and let the mare drink out of a stream. He could hear Matt moving around a little restlessly, propped up against a tree where James had set him.

“James?”

“Yeah?” He moved over to check on him. “Want some water? You should probably rehydrate.”

“Fuckin’ shoulder hurts.”

“You always this much of a whiner?”

“Pretty much.” Matt readjusted himself again, grunting. His head was rolling around against the tree. James could see Matt was having a hard time tracking him.

“Can you get on the horse yourself? Then I’ll dose you again?”

“I’m getting up and you’ll knock me out?”

“Just painkillers, no sedatives.”

“Same thing,” Matt grumbled. Something about it was so cute, James smiled. Matt stilled and stared at him dazedly a minute. Then he struggled to get up, James grabbing his upper arm to help. They hobbled over to the mare together. Matt looked at the horse blankly.

“Let’s get you up,” James said, when he got tired of waiting for Matt to move. Matt leaned his head against the horse’s withers. She swung her head around to whiffle at him. With lots of prodding, and putting Matt’s foot in a stirrup, James got him to swing up onto the horse.

And almost over the other side. “Shit!” He grabbed Matt’s waistband. Matt overcorrected (with his help, he had to admit) and started to fall back on James. Finally,

James planted a hand on his ass and shoved. Gently. And maybe gave a little squeeze.

God he was a pervert. Matt giggled a little. James snorted a laugh, and swung up behind Matt, hypo-mister ready.

“Here, tilt your head back,” James prodded him. Matt leaned back, falling against his chest, resting his head on James’s shoulder. James put an arm across Matt’s middle to steady him.

“Mmmmm, you’re warm. And hard.” James froze for a second. “You have nice muscles, James.” Matt snuggled back into his chest, wiggling his shoulders.

Oh. *That* kind of hard.

“You’re loopy. Ready for this?”

“No, give me a minute—Gah! James, you bastard!” James had dosed Matt before he realized his head was being held down by James’s hands and the hypo-mister was up his nose. He figured getting it over with was the best approach.

Matt sneezed. James smiled to himself while he put the hypo-mister back in the saddlebag that held James’s pack.

“I can hear you smiling back there,” Matt growled at him.

“How can you hear that?”

“I couldn’t, but now I know you were.”

“Shit.” Oldest trick in the book.

They started out again, and after a minute, Matt gave in to his exhaustion and slouched against James. James wrapped his arm a little tighter around Matt. So he wouldn’t fall off, of course.

“After a performance like that, you better be a cuddler,” Matt grumped.

James was surprised to realize he just might be.

MATT started to make real progress healing, resting, or sleeping nearly constantly. When James got him off the horse at dawn after their first night of travel, Matt stared blankly at the mare while James made a minimal camp.

“Problem?”

“We can’t keep calling her ‘the horse’,” Matt said in a dull voice.

“Huh?”

“You told me to take care of the horse. I’m taking care of her. She needs a name.”

“How about Horse?”

Matt raised both eyebrows at the horse. She snorted at him. “I don’t think she likes it.”

James stopped digging through the food stores and stared off into the distance a second. “Nope, not so much.” He didn’t make any other suggestions, though. Matt gave him a mini-glare. He couldn’t quite work up to the whole thing.

“Ask her if she likes ‘Miz Horse’.”

“You just did. She can hear you, you know.”

“Well then find out her answer,” Matt snapped.

“Fine with her. She’s hungry.”

“Oh, sorry, Miz.” Matt immediately shortened her new name. He fumbled a little getting her bit off, but the saddle could practically take itself off. It was really just a glorified saddle blanket with stirrups attached. He couldn’t find anything to comb Miz Horse with, so he scratched his fingers through her hair where the saddle had been. She

snorted and shook herself a little, then clopped away from Matt when she'd had enough of his clumsiness. "Hey!" Matt said to her. "Don't ignore me." She nickered softly, but didn't stop. It almost sounded like a laugh.

James laughed. "She thinks you're too slow."

"She could just wander off. Do we have a halter for her?" Matt looked around blankly, as if one might be lying on the ground in front of him.

James gave him the far-off stare again. Then his eyes came back into focus. "She's not leaving us."

Matt shook his head and hid the saddle and bridle under a tree where aerial surveillance wouldn't pick them up. Hopefully. "You don't think it's at all weird that you're communicating with a horse? You can't do it with people, can you? Not like that."

James looked startled. "Yeah," he said in surprise. "It is weird, isn't it? Wasn't really thinking about it, I guess." He shrugged. "You want stroganoff or spaghetti and meatballs?"

"James. You talk to animals."

"So do you."

"Fine. Animals talk to you."

"So, spaghetti and meatballs? You just had stroganoff the other night."

"James."

"Matt." James looked at him, exasperated and a little anxious. "I don't know what's going on with my head. I can't do a damn thing about it. I need to just keep it together until we get home."

Matt held his eyes and walked over to where James was crouched down. "Sorry," he said softly, placing a hand on his head. "I'll shut up."

“’K. Thanks. Which ones are the spaghetti and meatballs?”

“James, I don’t care. I’m not hungry.” He fell more than sat down. Matt was exhausted, even after sleeping most of the night. Albeit on the back of a horse.

“You hafta eat, Matt. The menders won’t work as fast if you don’t.”

“They’ll still work. I just wanna lay down.” He grabbed his pack to pillow his head and started to lie down. James grabbed it back, causing Matt’s head to hit the dirt. “Hey!”

James smirked. “Wasn’t done with that.”

“Start putting the important shit in your own pack! That one’s mine.” He tried for it again, but James’s reflexes and energy were better than Matt’s.

“You can have it after you eat.”

“I’m not gonna eat, dammit!” He knew it was stupid, but he wasn’t hungry, and now he was pissed off too.

“I’m going to hold you down and force-feed you if you don’t do it yourself.” Matt could tell by the look in James’s eye that he meant it.

He finally ate, grumbling the whole time, with James crouching beside him watchdogging every bite. When he was done, he got up, stumbled over to where James had put out his bag, and fell into it. He made sure he took his pack with him, giving James the evil eye. The bastard just quirked up one corner of his lips.

Fucker.

JAMES stayed up a while after full sunrise. He’d stretched the digi-camo over their sleeping bags, partly to block the light and partly to protect them from overhead SAIA.

Explaining to Miz what the perimeter alarms were was beyond him. Or maybe her. James didn't set them up. Once he was sure she got that he wanted her to stay hidden as much as possible, and to notify him if she sensed anyone or anything coming, he lay down next to Matt. James snorted softly. First time he'd ever given guard duty to a horse.

But he needed sleep. While he could go at least another twenty-four before the situation got critical—especially since he was riding, not walking—James thought the benefit of a couple of hours was worth the risk.

It took him a while to puzzle it out. They weren't in a particularly safe spot. Not even a cave, just a low group of boulders he'd stretched the digi-camo across in a wood of scattered pine, with willow brush and a small water source nearby. Miz had a small clearing she could crop grass from, but mostly she stayed under the trees as he'd requested. They were at most thirty kilometers from their last known position, and they were being tracked by SAIA and dogs and who knew what else.

So why did he feel sleeping was okay, now? Because he couldn't sense any human presence right now other than theirs? His implant didn't make him infallible. It wasn't like he was some kind of wild animal, magically attuned to the world around him.

But he could sense those creatures. And none of them were giving any alarm. James closed his eyes and concentrated. He could sense a couple of small rodents nearby. And birds, maybe? It was all a kind of mental hum around him, background to the normal early morning forest noises. Mental input he took in subconsciously.

James fell asleep, trying to figure out what a spider's brain waves might feel like. Or if he could even sense them.

Miz woke him up at 1330. He'd slept longer than he'd intended. Totally losing his edge. James shied away from

thinking about how he could have fallen this far out of the habits of the past four years in just a few months. He stuffed it in the box with the other things he wasn't going to think about right now.

He woke quietly, not opening his eyes or moving, just sensing. Miz wasn't alarmed. None of the rodents or birds were particularly alarmed. Miz was just standing hear him, nudging him occasionally with her nose. "What?" James finally snapped at her.

She snorted at him indignantly. He rolled his eyes, turning away from her. "Sorry, Miz." He was apologizing to a fucking horse. She nickered a little, and nudged him again. He turned around and patted her, concentrating on what she might be trying to tell him.

"Seriously?" James stared at her. "You woke me up because you're *bored*?" She neighed and bobbed her head, nearly whacking him. "Jesus," he muttered. "Fine, you can keep watch with me." He picked up the rifle and stomped toward the stream, with Miz right behind him. She nickered at him happily.

He woke Matt up a few hours before sundown. Matt stared blearily around while James nagged him into drinking and eating. He wasn't doing very well. With the meds and the nanos, he should be a lot better than this after thirteen hours of sleep.

"Let's look at your shoulder, Matty."

"Let's not."

"C'mon, I need to see. There shouldn't be any danger of reopening an artery now. We have extra pressure patches now that we've got the mountie's supplies, anyway."

Matt stared at him balefully, but set down the cup he'd been drinking from as James crouched in front of him. Matt

grabbed his hand for a second as James reached for him. “I think it’s bad, James.” James just squeezed his hand before disentangling it. He had to look; Matt knew that.

James unsealed Matt’s shirt, trying not to get distracted. His fingers lightly brushed Matt’s pale, smooth skin, pulling the sides of the shirt open. James could swear Matt shivered a little. Or maybe that was him. Distractedly, James pulled off the first pressure patch. It wrapped all the way around the deltoid and ball of Matt’s shoulder. After he pulled off the patch, he spent a few seconds tracing his fingertips down the smooth skin on Matt’s back.

Then he saw the wound, and nothing could distract him from that. “Holy living shit!” He was nearly shouting. *Way to keep the patient calm*.

“What?” Matt was staring straight ahead, into James’s neck, refusing to look down at the wound.

Matt’s shoulder was hamburger. Red, mostly healthy-looking hamburger, but raw and exposed. James could see his white collarbone peeking out. The wound was barely seeping blood, no gushers. It would need to be cleaned. The nano-menders and the time-release antibiotics James had given him helped keep it healthy, but he needed to get the dead tissue out.

How many times had he treated someone in the field? Fifty? More? This was the first time he’d so seriously underestimated the damage. Hopefully. James swallowed, his throat so dry it made a little clicking sound.

“Yeah, it’s bad, Matt. Worse than I thought.” He raised his eyes to Matt’s face. Matt wouldn’t look at him. “Sorry.”

Now Matt looked at him. “Sorry for what?”

“I just… I underestimated the damage.”

Matt looked at him quizzically. “So? You couldn’t have done anything else, right? Nothing more?”

James thought about it. “No, I guess not.”

“It’s just going to take longer than you thought to mend?”

James nodded and swallowed again. “Yeah.”

“So, nothing to be sorry for. Get me another pressure patch and we’ll put it back on. I don’t think you need to bother messing with the other one.” Matt still hadn’t looked at his shoulder wound.

“I’m cleaning them, Matt.” Matt sighed but didn’t argue. James got started.

“James?” Matt sounded hesitant.

“Yeah?” James looked up from where he was numbing Matt’s shoulder, rubbing the local topical into undamaged skin.

“I won’t—I mean, I’m not going to lose it, right?” Matt looked away. James stopped rubbing and he leaned forward, nosing Matt’s hair out of his way and gently kissing his forehead. Matt looked back, startled.

“No. You’re not losing it.” James voice was firm. They stared at each other a second before Matt looked away again.

Once James had cleaned the big stuff out, he put on a new pressure patch. It was the surest way to keep the gaping wound together and sterile while they traveled.

He reached for the other wound. “Gotta clean out the arm, Matt.” Matt nodded, watching Miz Horse. He had a funny look on his face.

“James, what’s she—?” But he didn’t finish before the percussive thrumming began in his prosthetic again. James could feel it, leaning against Matt’s leg. He stared at the leg a second in confusion. “James,” Matt said sharply. “She’s gotta get under the digi too.”

Oh fuck. *Here, Miz.* The mare started over before he'd finished the thought. SAIA. Heat signatures. *On your side*, he told Miz as he reached for the knot that would bring the whole camo down on them.

The digi-camo was visual camouflage, but it would confuse tech, especially NV, UV, and infrared. It wasn't foolproof, but they'd been camped out under boulders all day, and James was banking on the sun-warmed boulders giving off enough heat that it would mask any leakage that came through the digi.

"Jesus, that horse is smart," Matt whispered.

"She just did what I told her." James was distractedly tucking the digi in around Miz. She nibbled at his shoulder as he leaned across her. He grabbed a treat from the saddlebag next to him and held it out to her, securing the digi on the other side with his other hand.

Matt was curling into a ball on his side too. Imitating a boulder. "She doesn't do what I tell her."

"Likes me, I guess." James was too preoccupied to think about it. Matt dropped it. They were silent except for Miz's crunching and whiffling. She gave a soft nicker. James shot her a glare, and she snorted in disgust but settled down.

Soon, they could all feel thrumming in their bones. It had to be within five meters at most. James was expending most of his mental energy keeping Miz from moving. She was used to things like SAIA, but she'd never been in the position of hiding from them.

He was staring at Miz when he felt a warm hand on his ankle. He flicked a glance at Matt. Matt's eyes were closed, and his chest barely moved. He looked like he was resting peacefully. But his grip around James's ankle was tight. James couldn't decide if it was for his own comfort or

Matt's. Maybe both. He slipped a hand down and gripped Matt's wrist.

Then Miz gave a little snort, recalling him to what he really needed to be doing.

Hint: It wasn't mooning over some slim blond hottie while they were hiding under a blanket from a Stealth AI Aircraft with enough fire power on board to take out a small town. James forcibly removed his attention from his ankle (and his dick) and returned it to Miz.

He kept his hand where it was, though.

MATT was in something of a mental fog. Exhaustion, not fever, he was pretty sure. "Am I hot?" he murmured to James, just loud enough that he'd hear it.

"Fuck," James groaned. "Been trying not to think about that." James's arm gripped him a little tighter, pulling Matt just that much closer to his body.

"So you think I might have a fever?" Matt was alarmed. An infected wound could lead to an amputation.

James was silent for a minute. "Oh. That kinda hot. No." His voice was rough and rumbly. And Matt could feel the blush against the side of his neck and ear.

He smirked. Then, very deliberately, he scooted his hips back and ground his ass—just a little—into James's groin.

James gave a quiet groan. It was sexy as hell. "Matt," he rumbled. Matt couldn't tell if it was a warning or a plea. Then he felt James's lips skimming his neck, barely touching, just that rough chapped skin and those scratchy whiskers skating up toward his ear.

A plea, then.

Hot breath in his ear. Matt shivered. “Can’t do this now,” James was breathing more than whispering. Matt could feel James’s tongue flicking just behind the lobe. Then his teeth, nipping close to his spine.

Or maybe more of a warning plea. *Shit*.

“Yeah,” Matt whispered back, leaning into James more, rubbing his shoulder blades against James’s chest and arching his neck a little. He could feel James’s hard pecs pressing against him. Mmmmm. More shivers worked their way up his spine. “Should wait till we get to the convent.”

“We’re going to fuck in a convent?”

Matt smirked again. “It’s an RCC convent; seems appropriate.”

James snorted in agreement, but then he gently pulled away from Matt. Moved his chest back and took his mouth from Matt’s ear. Matt shivered again, from the loss of warm, hot man. Obligingly, he scooted a bit forward.

“Tell me about your family,” James said. An attempt to distract them both.

“You pretty much know about them.”

“No. Your grandparents. And I know you have a bunch of cousins.”

Oh. The grandparent thing often confused people, even in this age of multiple blended families. “Well, technically Sid and Lance are my grampas. My mom was their daughter. But Anais is Sid’s twin, and she was the surrogate mother for my mom and Uncle Jackson. So we all sorta call her Gramma. Sometimes. If she’s in a good mood.”

“So, what, your Uncle Jackson had a million kids?”

“No, just two. Boy and girl twins. Must run in the family.” Matt was feeling sleepy, again. He zoned.

James jostled him. “But you have other cousins, right? On your dad’s side?”

“Mm, no, just one. Dad’s sister has a son. The grampas and Anais all had another kid together, Fleur. She was their niece, but her parents both died in the fighting in the Wallowas when she was little and all three of them adopted her. Fleur’s dad, my Great-Uncle Gabriel, was Sid and Anais’ older brother, and her mother was Grampa Lance’s little sister, Kylie. Fleur has four kids.”

Matt wondered momentarily if that explanation had made any sense, but he figured James would ask if something was unclear. He leaned back against him, too tired to sit up by himself. He tried not to push his hips back into James again, though. He was moderately successful. James tightened his arm around Matt again, gripping him, running one thumb back and forth just under his left pec. “Mmmmm,” he breathed.

“Sleep, Matty,” James rumbled against his ear. Matt shivered a little. He was about equal parts turned on and exhausted. He fell asleep against James, debating whether it would help matters or hurt if he asked for a jerk-off break.

Matt didn’t wake up again until it was light. James was following a creek too small for its bed this time of year (as usual). The bank rose to a couple of feet over their heads, even on Miz Horse.

He had to piss. Matt gave a jaw-cracking yawn, stretching as much as he could without hurting his shoulder, hitting James, or overbalancing. “Can we stop, soon?”

“Morning. Yeah, couple hundred yards we should hit a tributary and—” James consulted Matt’s GPS. “—a farm. We go north from there, less than a kilometer from the convent.”

They came around a bend and saw a wash that cut into the north side of the bank. They could see a barn a little up the way. “Kinda late in the morning. Farm should be up and out.” Still, they needed to keep a low profile.

James brought Miz to a halt and swung off. He waited to help Matt down. Matt gave him a sour look. With his injured arm, getting down was tricky, but that didn’t mean he had to like needing help. He sighed and dismounted, James planting a hand on his back to steady him.

Miz plodded over to the grassy base of the bank, and looked at Matt sourly. She flapped her lips around, baring her teeth at him. James laughed softly. “Wants you to take out her bit.”

“Why does she want me to do it?”

“Um… guess she thinks it’s your job.” James shrugged, turning away so Matt wouldn’t see his smirk. He wasn’t entirely successful. Or really successful at all.

Matt grumbled, then stalked over to Miz and unfastened her bridle. She made a sound suspiciously like laughter as she bent her head to the grass.

Matt knew it was petty, but he took great pleasure in pissing on an especially green, juicy-looking clump of grass. Miz Horse snorted at him, and turned her back. “I don’t get why she can communicate with you, but she orders *me* around.”

James shrugged again, rearranging his pack. He took stuff from the saddlebags and Matt’s pack and sorted it, stuffing things he thought he might need into his. “Maybe ’cause she knows you can’t argue with her.”

They decided it would be best if James scouted ahead, and Matt stayed with Miz and their stuff. James took the DEW rifle and left Matt with the pistol and shotgun.

“Is it loaded with the horse-killing bullets?”

Both James and Miz looked at him with the same expression. Like he’d just farted in church. “That’s not funny,” James said tonelessly. “You’ll hurt her feelings.”

Matt felt like stomping his feet and pointing out that Miz was hurting his feelings. But he wasn’t ten anymore (dammit), so he settled for grumbling and dragging all their equipment under a shallow overhang, where he made himself somewhat comfortable.

“There’s a walking trail about seventy meters north of us, paralleling the stream. If I don’t come back by noon, leave Miz.” He paused to think something at her that he didn’t share with Matt. She snorted and bobbed her head. “And head for the convent. There should be a sign at the cutoff trail.”

“Okay,” Matt agreed. Then he wondered when he’d become comfortable taking James’s orders on this little adventure. He sighed. No use fighting it.

“That sound like a plan to you?”

Okay, that made him feel a little better. They were a democratic rescue team. “Yep, works for me.”

James stared at him a few seconds before moving up the wash. “Let’s do a com check.” He handed one of the RIA com sets to Matt. Then they did a quick check, encryption on just in case. Matt turned his to receive for the time being.

“I’ll keep it turned off ’til I’m headed back, unless I run into trouble. See you soon,” James said softly over his shoulder.

—CHAPTER 12—

"MATT, I'm returning to your location with a tail." James's voice in his ear startled Matt so badly he didn't answer immediately. He might have been asleep.

"Matt, acknowledge message received."

"Received," Matt returned automatically. He rarely wore an ear-com unit and had never had a Brain-link installed. For a super secret agent man, he was really pretty low-tech. Came with keeping the low profile.

"You need to get Miz to leave. Sister Immaculata told me a little story about a mountie who was killed and whose horse was stolen."

"Gotcha." Matt looked at Miz, not more than ten feet away. She looked back. "Get outta here, Miz. You gotta hide or we're all toast."

Nothing. She looked at him mildly and lowered her head to crop more grass.

"Miz. Seriously, James says go. I'm not trying to trick you."

She did that lip-waving thing. What the fuck did that mean if she didn't have a bridle on?

"Miz, go!"

She took a few steps closer and snorted on him.

“Ugh, Miz! You blew snot on me!” James started laughing in his ear. “Fuck you,” Matt grumbled. “You deal with her; she won’t listen to me.”

James stopped laughing suddenly. “Oh. Maybe because I told her not to leave you, no matter what you did.”

“You think I need a fucking horse to babysit me?”

“No, I just meant you know, if you were mean to her or….”

“Or what?” Matt swore he could hear James’s uncomfortable shrug.

“Tried to make her leave.”

Fucker. “Well, then, I guess you’ll just have to deal with her.”

James started grumbling. As far as Matt was concerned, he was on his own. Judging by the quantity and quality of grumbling, he had to pretend to get lost—for the sake of his tail—so he could find a line of communication with Miz without a visual.

“Jesus, James. What kind of hunter gets lost that easily?”

James didn’t answer. Finally he made contact with Miz and she started plodding off. She looked kind of unhappy. Suddenly Matt realized they were more or less sending her off without knowing when or if they’d see her again.

Shit. That was kinda… mean. “Bye, Miz,” he called quietly. “We’ll see you again, soon.” She stopped and looked back at him for a second. He could swear she almost looked like she liked him. Then she started moving off again, with a little more walk and a little less plod.

“That was nice, Matty,” James said in his ear, startling him again.

Damn open mic.

When James arrived at their rendezvous spot—approaching from downstream where there was less cover for his tail—Matt had covered himself head to toe in a sleeping bag.

Matt heard James hit the ground next to his head kinda hard. What the heck? James lifted the edge of the bag up, peering in anxiously at Matt. Had he been worried?

For a minute, Matt thought James was going to rip the bag off and expose his face. Matt hadn't shaved in days, and his last sonic had been over two months ago. He wasn't sure he could pass for James's wife like this.

Guess he could have a hairy wife.

James seemed to relax and get a grip on himself almost instantly. Then he smiled that dazzling smile at Matt. "Hello, Matilda?" His voice was loud.

"What?" Th'fuck?

"That's your name." He was murmuring now. The tail must be a few yards away, still. James's smile had calmed down to one of his lip quirks. He seemed downright happy.

Matt sighed. "Well, fuck me running."

"Any way you want it, baby." James winked. He was doing that thing again. Being all playful now that whatever was stressing him out had worked itself out.

Maybe he had been worried about Matt.

Matt felt a slow smile light his face. "James! I didn't know you were into girls," he answered back in a quiet falsetto. Then he murmured, "How do you like my Matilda voice? Who the hell picked that name, anyway? I could have picked something better than that."

"It's fine, hon. You just rest up here while I pack up the camp. Your PMS is gonna ease up in a day or two." PMS. Nice.

James’s tail was getting really close to them. Matt heard the guy. James’s shadow had climbed up the bank and was creeping along the edge on his belly, sending little showers of dirt and rock down the bank. Matt rolled his eyes.

“Thank you, sugarplum.” Matt made his voice sound weak and breathy. “What happened at the convent?” he added subvocally. James leaned forward so it looked like they were just being mushy.

“Went fine. Pearl Hessia—Sister Immaculata—was expecting us and knows you’re injured. Colonel Viteaux contacted her last night. I got in, no problem, but they took a read on my ID. If we get connected to this place, the RIA will know my alias.”

Probably an unavoidable risk. “They going to need an ID for me?” That was going to be a big problem if they did.

“Nah. This is Idaho. I’m the man and if I say you’re you, you’re you.” James grinned at him again. Matt was going to start losing brain cells if he didn’t cool it with the lethal charm.

James got serious again quickly. “Hessia’s nervous about something, though. She seems competent, ’m not worried, but something’s weird. Think maybe I make her apprehensive. Something like that.”

Before Matt could ask James for details, he heard someone else arriving. “Gonna cover you up again now. Sister Immaculata’s here with another ‘gardener’.”

“Whaddya mean, ‘gardener’?” Matt asked, but James flicked the bag over his head before he got it out. Fine. He’d find out back at the convent.

THE "gardeners" were the Vatican militia. They knew shit about effective covert ops, so pretending they were gardeners seemed to be pointless. Who knew, maybe they actually gardened too?

When they finally got into their room at the convent—a small prefab, but a fairly large single room inside, with its own bathroom—Sister Immaculata waved the gardeners' "assistance" off, and they were alone. The one who'd been tailing James turned out to be a "gardener" as well. He'd made no secret of the fact that he'd been "hiding," lying on his belly at the top of the bank.

When the guy had slipped and tumbled down the stream bank, Sister Immaculata had raised her eyes heavenward in a particularly nunly expression of disgust.

"What a couple of dumbasses," Matt remarked drowsily after he'd managed to strip down to his shorts and climb into the bed. Sister Immaculata had given them the all-clear for listening devices. Still, James turned the antique satellite receiver on for background noise.

Sister Immaculata snorted. Matt looked at her sharply. "Sorry, was that cursing? I guess I figured if you knew Anais, cursing wouldn't be a big deal." She gave him a small smile, but said nothing. "I also wasn't so sure you were actually a nun…."

"Oh, I'm a nun. After I left SOUF I joined a North American Catholic Church nunnery. I ended up here because of my combat experience." The NACC had quite a spy network in place in RCC strongholds. Usually, they were ordained members of the RCC who were stuck behind enemy lines, but secretly defected to the NACC.

"So they bought that? That you'd join an NACC nunnery and then defect to an RCC convent?"

“Oh, they haven’t completely bought it, yet. I’m still being watched—hence the ‘gardeners’. But the RIA hasn’t caught on, yet, and the Vatican is only allowed so much power inside the Red.” She shrugged. “It hasn’t been hard to stay one step ahead of them.”

“So, they’ll be keeping an extra eye on us.” James looked over at her from where he was digging clean clothes out of his pack.

“I don’t know. Be cautious. You’re the first guests I’ve had in the two years I’ve been here. We’re not exactly a stop on the Grayscale Underground. And I do have relatives in Idaho.”

“You’re sure this room is clean?”

“My partner here came in and scanned the room while I went to get you. Sister Carmella was a Navy SEAL.” Matt could see James visibly relax.

“Thank you, Sister Immaculata.” James came over to where she was sitting on the bed, organizing medical supplies. Matt could tell he was deeply and sincerely grateful. James’s normally stoic expression had eased, and he’d taken her hand.

Sister Immaculata looked back at him in surprise. Then Matt saw her squeeze James’s hand lightly. But she said, “For God’s sake, thank me by not using that name in private. They gave me that here. In the NACC I’m just Pearl.” She turned to Matt. “I suppose you could call me Great-Auntie Pearl, if it makes you feel better.”

James gave his little half-smile, dropped her hand, and turned to Matt also. “’M gonna take a shower. Out in a few.”

“So….” Matt gave Pearl his most innocent look. She sighed.

“Anais warned me about you. Ask what you want to ask.”

“Why are you a nun? I mean, after the SOUF. You probably had a hard life, and now in your retirement—” Matt cut himself off when she looked up at him.

“I’m a nun because I feel I have sins I need to expunge.”

To break the strange tension, Matt made a poor joke. “Wow. I wonder when Anais is going to become a nun.”

“She doesn’t have any sins to repent.” Pearl was looking at her supplies again, but Matt could see a sad little smile on her face. She began mixing up a concoction he supposed she was going to send into him through IV vial.

“I thought Anais wouldn’t do anything unless it was a sin.” No joke this time; he believed it.

Pearl laughed a little. “Hers are very different than mine. Harmless. I think I helped to harm a lot of people. Soldiers.”

“We all do our share of damage to the enemy.”

“The soldiers I did the most damage to weren’t enemies.”

Matt went cold. Instinctively, he didn’t believe she meant him any harm. But she was mixing up a drug cocktail for him…. On the other hand, James wouldn’t have left him alone with her if he’d sensed any ill intent.

Pearl looked at him. “Not that kind of harm. I wasn’t a spy or double agent. I was part of a task force looking into biocybe enhancements for soldiers. Things got to the point where… experiments were done.” She held his gaze. “On Psi-force.”

Oh. *Oh*. “Um… James—”

“I need to talk to James, see what’s happening with him.” She looked hesitantly at Matt. “I thought you might broach the subject with him. He seems somewhat close to you.”

Were they close? Like, brothers-in-arms close, or an even more intimate kind of close? Brothers-in-arms close was good enough for the situation. “Yeah, I’ll talk to him.”

She expelled a breath, quietly but obviously. “You’ll have a couple of days before you’re well. I haven’t looked yet, but from what James indicated, you need at least that to be able to travel without assistance.” She cut off his obvious objection. “Walking out, no horse, no one to hold you on the horse, no sleep if necessary.”

Oh. That kind of well.

“I’d like at least a few hours to talk to James. Tomorrow would be good. Now lay back. I need to look at your arm and shoulder.”

Matt fell back more than laid. He had a hard time with wounds. His own, that was. Other people’s? That was the same as it ever was. He could deal; battle dress, triage, whatever. But every time he got injured he fought flashbacks of lying in that New Mexico scrub, looking down and seeing his leg gone.

He focused on a spot on the ceiling, trying to zone out on the music. It was the slightly discordant instrumental dance music that had been popular in the 2070s. He wasn’t so into it. Pearl quickly had his pressure patches off, and redressed the shoulder wound in an air-circulating wrap. The arm took longer. She had to debride it, first.

“James should have done this when he did your shoulder. With the new super-bugs that are always popping up, he shouldn’t have taken the chance.” She was murmuring so quietly, Matt didn’t know if she was talking

to herself or him. “Why didn’t he?” she continued after a moment.

“Um… I can’t remember. Maybe we were interrupted?” Or maybe he hadn’t been dealing with it well, and James had decided his mental health was more important than his physical?

Pearl gave him a look, but said nothing and went back to his arm. She’d numbed it with a hypo-spray, so all he could feel were tugs and pressure.

Matt heard the shower shut off. Pearl started rewrapping his arm wound in the breathable wrap. He felt truly comfortable for the first time in days, and he’d started to drowse. He couldn’t feel either his arm or his shoulder, and he was getting extra loopy again. “D’you give me some painkillers?”

“Yes, when I numbed your arm. James had been underdosing you a little.”

“Whoopsie,” Matt giggled. James was just coming out of the bathroom. He’d shaved, and looked all clean. Matt bet, if he ran his lips up that neck to that jaw, James would smell like soap and man. Mmmmmm.

James stopped and stared at Matt. “Did you give him more painkillers?”

“I’m starting to think I shouldn’t have.”

“He’s pretty sensitive to them.” James gave Pearl a weak smile. “Guess I shoulda mentioned that.”

She shrugged and went back to preparing his IV. “Well, I gave him enough to make him drowsy—”

“’M drowsy.” Matt nodded enthusiastically.

Pearl gave him a wry look and continued. “I’m not giving him a sedative, but I am giving him more nano-

menders, which will make him more tired. I think you'll sleep soon, Matt."

"What else's in there?" He nodded floppily at the IV she was preparing.

"Anti-bionanos, since your arm wasn't cleaned for so long." James looked sheepish. "A nutrient mix to feed the nano-menders, and a time-release NSAID. No more painkillers for you until tomorrow morning."

Matt lost interest about halfway through the list. He looked over at James. "Whadda you gonna do?"

"Babysit you, I guess." He gave Matt his lip-quirk half smile. Then James started organizing all the stuff that had spilled out of their packs, and put the dirty clothes in the in-room wash-dry.

Pearl put the IV vial in, gave instructions for James on pulling it out—he shuddered and swallowed, but said he could do it—and left them alone with promises that someone would bring food soon.

Matt was still awake when James finished straightening up. His eyes were cracked, watching James.

James stood awkwardly beside the bed, looking everywhere but down at Matt in his underwear. Matt smiled a little and stretched, arching his back off the bed a tiny bit and pointing his toes. He knew he was showing off, but it seemed like a good idea. Give James a peek at his abs. Or you know, an eyeful.

James cleared his throat. "You kinda cold? Wanna get under the blankets?"

"Nope," Matt said languidly, and looked James up and down, slowly. "But maybe I would if you got in with me."

James sighed and ran a hand through his hair, tangling his fingers in the curls and gripping slightly. "Matt," he said after a tense moment, "you're high. We can't, uh… do

anything. Not right now." He stopped and cleared his throat again. "Even if I do lay down with you for a while."

Matt dropped his eyes down to look at James's dick. He could see it pretty clearly, even in the loose clothes James was now wearing. As he stared, he could almost see it getting harder and bigger. Matt flicked his tongue out over his lower lip.

James groaned. "Matt, c'mon, don't do this to me."

"Do what?" He didn't even try to act innocent; just grinned at James. Well, at James's dick.

"You know what." James's voice was rumbly.

Yumbly.

"C'mere," Matt whispered, looking up into James's eyes.

Matt knew James wanted to resist, but he didn't want to *enough*. He was pretty sure that what James wanted more was lying in a bed, mostly naked and heavy-eyed, trying to entice him into said bed. James groaned again, and took a step forward. He was close enough so Matt could raise his hand and rest it on James's thigh.

"Closer," Matt said in that same whisper, grinning and looking James in the eye. James swallowed and took another step. Matt dropped his eyes, and began trailing his fingers lightly up James's leg. He was close enough to the bed that his knees were pressed against the side, and Matt could trace fingertips all the way up to his groin without straining.

"This isn't a good idea, Matt."

Matt smiled wider, knowing he had James, now. "'S'a very good idea."

Matt's fingers traced up James's hip bone first, then back down, following the join between James's thigh and

pelvis until Matt hit his tendon. James sucked in a breath and held it. Matt could feel all of James's heat through the soft material of his lounge pants. He smiled even wider, running his thumb along the taut sinew for a few seconds before turning his hand and tracing James's sac with one fingernail. Matt turned his hand over and slipped it between James's legs, pressing up gently. James expelled the breath he'd been holding with a groan.

Matt turned his hand again, and ran his palm up past James's balls to trace along his hard cock. It was longer than the length of his hand. Matt rubbed a little with the heel of his hand and grasped the head between his fingertips, gripping it. James rewarded him with a soft grunt.

"Never woulda thought I'd have you in the palm of my hand like this." Matt grinned up at James. James's eyes were closed, but he cracked them and looked down at Matt.

"Whaddya mean?" James was breathing a bit heavily. Matt loosened up his grip a second then squeezed again. James gasped softly. Matt gave a little hip wiggle, thinking about how that must feel.

"In high school, you hated me. Now you want me. Feels good. Like payback."

James froze. "This is payback to you?"

Matt's smile slipped. "Kinda. Guess so." He shrugged, feeling uncertain. And fuzzy-headed.

James took a large step back and just stared at Matt. Still hard, still breathing a little heavy, but no longer looking very happy about it all. "Oh." He stared at Matt a moment longer. "Guess I kinda deserve a little payback." He looked away, standing rigid and still.

Matt got a bad feeling in his stomach. Like he'd really fucked something up. He brought his arm down from where

it was hanging in mid-air and flopped back on the pillows, looking at James. The drugs were making him loopy, and he was trying to puzzle things out. Should he apologize? For what, exactly? Weren't they both enjoying that?

"James…," he began uncertainly.

"Should get that vial off your arm. 'S empty." Carefully, James sat next to Matt on the bed and leaned over him, removing the IV from Matt's wounded arm. He was careful not to let his body touch Matt's.

Matt could tell James hated doing it. He didn't like needles sticking in himself, and apparently he wasn't fond of needles in other people, either. But Matt couldn't figure out how to make this easier on James without making things worse. Mostly because he didn't understand what had happened. His head was just too fuzzy. And its blood supply was still compromised.

When he was done, James looked up at Matt and hesitantly reached a hand out. He looked sad. Running his hand through Matt's hair, he gripped the back of his neck. "Get some rest," James said scratchily. He kissed Matt on the forehead.

Not really where Matt was hoping to be kissed.

Th'fuck happened? Matt lay there, watching James with all their equipment, repacking bags, and tried to piece together what he'd done wrong. His eyelids got heavier and heavier, and he finally drifted off with no more clue than he'd had when James had stepped away from him.

The whole time, without really realizing it, he kept his mind shielded. But just before sleeping it slipped. Just enough that James suddenly stopped puttering and turned to look at Matt.

—CHAPTER 13—

Matt slept almost twenty-four hours. He woke up twice to pee, and once James woke him to spoon soup into his mouth, but that was all he remembered. When he woke up at 1618 he figured it had to be the next day. He was almost positive it had been evening when he'd fallen asleep.

Unless it had been two days. He got himself out of bed and stumbled to the bathroom. He was nowhere near as high as he'd been yesterday. When he sat back on the bed, he took stock.

He was hungry. He no longer had to piss, due to his trip to the bathroom. His arm and shoulder ached, but it was bearable. He wasn't supposed to leave this prefab. James was nowhere to be found.

And fuck, James was mad at him. Or maybe hurt. Or both. Because Matt had been an asshole, then too high to realize what he'd said. Matt groaned and dropped his head in his hands. Fuckity fuckity fuck.

He didn't know if James just wanted to fuck him or wanted more, but he was pretty sure the guy didn't want to be the victim of a revenge fuck. Matt wouldn't, in his situation. Well, probably. Revenge sex could be hot. Especially when bondage was involved (all parties consenting, of course).

If Matt was going to be honest about it? He'd like more from James than just sex, so it might be smart not to fuck

up so early on. *Just a little FYI, self*. Because, if there was even a little possibility of a relationship, he wouldn't turn that down.

Matt's stomach growled, reminding him that it was an empty pit and would like him to get over his horny, emotional self and put something in it.

He searched the room but found both com units still there and no message from James. Matt flopped back on the bed. Great. Stuck here until James or Pearl remembered him and showed up.

But he *could* send James a message. He could pick up brain wave echoes, or ricochets. Something. Matt found the e-latches for the windows and opened both of them.

Shit, it was cold out there! Course, it might help if he was wearing more than undershorts. Whatever—he was hungry. He sat on the bed yogi style (couldn't hurt, right?) and concentrated on James. And food.

It took about ten minutes before he heard James at the door. Unlocking it with an old-fashioned key card, it sounded like. Matt could have sworn they had codable thumb locks, but most of their arrival was fuzzy. James was unfamiliar with key cards, considering the amount of difficulty he was having. Matt untangled himself and went to let James in.

He probably should have seen it coming. James wouldn't make that much noise. But Matt was still a little loopy, so when he opened the door and found a girl-nun in wimple and habit standing there, he was nearly as surprised as she was.

Embarrassingly, he yelped. A small yelp. Fortunately, it was drowned out by her shriek. Her very loud, attention-getting shriek. Matt's training kicked in, and before she finished he had one hand over her mouth and was muscling her into the room.

She struggled, but didn’t really fight him. Didn’t even try to take advantage of his obviously injured shoulder. Did they teach these nuns anything about self-defense? Christ. It wouldn’t have been hard to get away from him. He was still weak and his shoulder hurt like fuck, restraining someone like this. Matt shoved her against the wall, uncomfortably aware he was in his shorts and pressed up against some of her girly parts. Ick.

She had on enough layers for both of them, fortunately. Matt held her pinned there, still covering her mouth. “I won’t hurt you, but you have to be quiet.”

She nodded vigorously.

“I’m going to take my hand off your mouth, and you’re going to stay silent. If you start shrieking, I’m going to knock you out and gag you. If you try to run, I’ll knock you out, tie you up, and gag you.”

More frantic nodding. It was downright enthusiastic. Carefully, Matt lifted his hand off, letting it hover in front of her mouth for a good minute. Her face was white and her eyes were huge, but she remained silent, breathing rapidly.

“Good. Okay, now I’m going to—”

Suddenly the door burst open and James came in, shutting it behind him firmly. He was on full alert. Matt watched James scan the room until he found Matt pressed up against the nun, next to the door. For a split second, he looked really, really pissed. And hurt. Then James’s face slipped into his normal non-expression.

Although it didn’t seem so normal anymore. Matt had seen so many sides to James in the past few days, and most of them didn’t wear this expressionless mask.

“Situation,” James snapped out. Matt tried very, very hard not to roll his eyes. He might even have been successful.

“I thought you were having trouble working the lock, so I opened the door for you and found, um, her.” He tipped his head toward the girl-nun.

“You *opened the door*?” James wasn’t expressionless now. He looked like he thought Matt was a gargantuan idiot.

Matt gave his eyes full rolling privileges. “She was gonna come in anyway, James. I was able to grab her.”

James appeared to have a jaw tic Matt had never noticed before. “What’s with the undershorts?”

Matt stared, speechless. On the queer spectrum, he was about as penis-centric as a boy could be. “I. Just. Woke. Up.”

James blinked. “Oh,” he said, relaxing a little. They stared at each other a minute. Matt felt like it was maybe a little meta-communication. He just didn’t know what he was saying. James relaxed further, unclenching his jaw and looking away.

Oh. He’d been reading his brain waves. The ones he hadn’t been shielding. For some reason, this pissed Matt off. He could feel his own jaw clenching. James glanced at him, then away again.

“Excuse me,” the forgotten nun said in a tiny, shaking voice. Matt and James both re-focused their attention on her. “Um, are you going to ravish me now?”

Sister Benigna—the girl-nun—apparently felt ravishment was in order. “You’re wearing your undershorts,” she pointed out with patient logic from her perch on the bed. Matt had set her there once she agreed not to run, scream, or fight. “It’s the logical next step.” Somehow, Matt wasn’t convinced that logic was her forte. Or calm her MO.

James, for reasons Matt couldn’t understand, seemed to find Sister Benigna hilarious. He was actually laughing. Matt gave him a narrow-eyed stare. “Th’fuck, James?”

James wiped his eyes and tried to sober up a little. He came and stood close to Matt, sub-vocalizing, “She wants it.”

What, and James wanted to give it to her? Matt kept glaring at him. James sobered up for real, this time. Matt was leaking brain waves, but didn’t care enough to fix it.

“No, I don’t want to give it to her! I just think it’s funny. And I think she’s checking out your package.” He was grinning again.

Grumbling, Matt went over to their packs and looked for a clean pair of all-weathers. Let Mr. Chuckles deal with Benigna.

Oh, nice. Mr. Chuckles did the laundry.

“Sister, how long have you been in this convent?” James was incredibly nice to her. Just like he was with everyone, Matt remembered. Everyone he felt needed his protection. Matt stopped just short of sealing his fly when the thought struck him.

So, when James wasn’t nice to someone, was he protecting himself? What did that mean about when he wasn’t nice to Matt? Or those times when he was so pathetically nice?

“My parents sent me here when I was twelve,” Benigna answered cheerfully, recalling Matt’s attention. “They really couldn’t afford so many kids, and I was the oldest, and everyone knows you can send your daughters to the sisters and they’re always happy for new novitiates—”

“How long ago were you, um, ordained?” James interrupted her.

She tittered—God, she was just the old-school nun stereotype, wasn't she? Except for the horny thing. "Oh, I wasn't ordained. That's for priests, silly!" She batted her eyes at James. Matt frowned at her, but she didn't notice. "I took vows! Like getting married. I'm one of the brides of Jesus Christ, our Lord and savior." She sounded less than enthusiastic about that. "And that was three years ago, when I was eighteen."

She was twenty-one? She looked fifteen. She barely topped five feet. Malnourishment in childhood, probably.

James looked over at Matt, giving him a long stare. Matt stared back. *What?*, he thought, feeling James might like to talk to him in private. But they couldn't leave the nun here on her own, at least not without cuffing her to the bed or something. James gave a little nod.

Matt shook his head. *He* wasn't tying up the nunette.

James sighed and turned toward her, clearly thinking he would have to do it. He wasn't proud of it, but Matt perched his hands on his hips and stomped his foot. *No you aren't!* James looked at him with both eyebrows raised.

Matt scowled back.

James quirked his lips.

"Um…," Benigna said. James turned away from her, to the door.

That's when Pearl knocked and walked in. "Shit," she said in a resigned voice. "I should have figured you'd make it here, Benigna."

IT APPEARED Sister Benigna was a known troublemaker. Pearl had cuffed her to the bed—and threatened to cut off her sulky lip, in the process—telling her, "If you didn't stick

your nose in where it doesn't belong, you wouldn't be cuffed to a bed." Then she gagged her.

Matt thought that was just because she'd always wanted to stuff a sock in Benigna's mouth. A dirty sock. Yuck.

James was grinning again. Matt decided he didn't need to know anything about a nun's fantasies and how being cuffed to a bed figured in them. James looked at him and smirked.

Then he winked. Matt got the feeling that while James found it amusing that the nunette thought bondage was titillating, his amusement was just in regard to her. But in regard to *Matt* being cuffed to the bed…. He shivered. And licked his lower lip. Completely unconsciously. Really.

James's pupils dilated, his eyes focusing on Matt's mouth. Then he slowly tracked lower over Matt's body. He still wasn't wearing a shirt. He wondered if James could see his heart beating under his rib cage, because it sure felt like it was trying to escape his chest.

Gah. He was getting hard and there were two nuns in the room. James's smirk grew, and he took a prowling step toward Matt.

This must mean he was forgiven for yesterday?

"Ahem!" Pearl said. She gave them each a hard stare. Matt was sure he hadn't blushed in years. Good to know he still knew how.

Pearl turned back to Benigna and plopped a pair of noise-canceling 'phones on her head. "Okay, we need to figure out what to do with her." Pearl was strictly business when she turned back to Matt and James.

"She wants to go with us," James said. Then he shot a look at Pearl and amended quickly, "I bet."

“It’s all right, James. I know about your biocybe implant.”

Matt was watching James’s face when she said it, so he caught the flash of shock and dismay. Crap. He had to talk to James about what Pearl had told him yesterday. But with a nun chained to their bed, it might be hard to find the appropriate venue.

“I’ll need to discuss this with my partner. I’m going to have to leave her here,” Pearl nodded her head toward Benigna, “while I go and figure this out. I don’t want to bring Sister Carmella here. Just in case Benigna isn’t ‘neutralized’ effectively, Carmella shouldn’t be exposed, also.

“Matt, this might be a good time for you to talk to James about my past,” she added briskly. Her tone didn’t adequately cover up her uncertainty. She walked out the door before James could react.

Matt blew out a breath. He decided to just get it over with, like pulling off a med patch. “She didn’t explain it to me, exactly, but it seems she might know something about your implant. I didn’t tell her anything.”

James was pissed. Even if his expressionless mask didn’t give it away, the tic in his jaw and the look in his eyes did. Instinctively, Matt reached out and laid a hand on James’s forearm and opened his mind completely. Somewhat to his surprise, James didn’t shake him off.

“She wants to talk to you about it. She regrets it, James.”

James blew out a breath, puffing out his cheeks. “That explains why she always feels so nervous around me.” James looked at Matt for a second, then pulled his hand out of his pocket, letting Matt’s hand slide down his arm, catching it in his. “Yeah. I think she wants to help me.”

Okay, there were advantages to having a serious talk with a guy who could read feelings. Instead of the long, painful conversation Matt anticipated, it was this one-minute clarification.

Wow, all men should have boyfriends with mind-reading implants. It would prevent a lot of girly, emotional scenes.

Shit, did he just think *boyfriend*? James looked up at him sharply, wide-eyed. His hand tightened convulsively over Matt's. Did James hear that? Or pick it up as meta-communication? Or whatever it was?

Oh fuck. As in, they hadn't yet, and he was unconsciously thinking of James as his *boyfriend*. Well, consciously, now. This wasn't good. James probably thought he was a possessive freak who went around sinking his claws into any guy who kissed him and ground his erection in his ass a little.

James tugged on his hand gently, reeling him in. He was looking in Matt's eyes. It wasn't until he was so close that Matt could see the individual whiskers in James's beard shadow that he realized what James wanted.

James's rough lips were on his, hot breath across Matt's mouth. Gentle suction, capturing first his upper lip, then his lower. Matt slid one hand around James's neck, James's hand sliding around to the small of his back. Just the tip of James's tongue flicking inside Matt's slightly parted lips. Matt opened more, needing James to take what he wanted. He might have moaned a little.

A shocked sound came from the direction of the bed. A sort of muffled gasp-shriek.

The fucking nunette.

Benigna's eyes were round as mini-discs. Matt had never actually thought anyone's eyes could fall out of their

head before, but now….

James got that grin again. Jesus, Benigna must have some kinky little brain waves in there. He turned back to Matt, gave him a quick kiss, and then nuzzled up to his ear and told him, “She wants to watch us fuck.”

They were going to have to take her back with them. She’d never survive here.

MATT was still laughing when the door opened, admitting Pearl and another nun. Of course it was a nun—what else would it be?

The new nun was basically a pinch-faced crotchety old lady. She looked like a barrel of laughs. Not that SEALs were generally the life of the party. “Sister Carmella, this is Matt Tennimore, with QESA, and First Lieutenant James Ayala, Psi-force.”

Then Sister Carmella smiled, and she became a friendly, crotchety old lady. “Hello, boys. Nice to meet you. I’ll skip the BS, Lieutenant. I’m sooo retired. Call me Carmella.” She turned and looked at the bed, and her mouth became pinched again. And sour. She stalked over and ripped off the ’phones. “I see you’re entertaining Sister Maligna.”

James snorted, and Matt laughed outright. Sister Benigna made indignant noises behind her gag. Carmella smiled nastily. “She’s not my favorite nun,” she told them. Unnecessarily.

Pearl just raised an eyebrow and set the tray she was carrying on the table next to the bed. On the far side from Benigna. “Matt, you really need to eat in order to continue healing. I’ll look at your wounds once we deal with Benigna.” She tossed Matt a roll after setting the tray

down. He could see butter on the tray, but was too hungry to bother getting it. He took a bite of the roll. Mmmmmm. Homemade. With real wheat flour.

Carmella turned back to them. “So, Ayala. Pearl tells me you can read minds.”

Matt turned to Carmella. Apparently they were going to talk freely in front of the nunette. “Not exactly, but I can pick up feelings and intent. Sometimes a word or two.” James turned and looked at Matt when he said that. Matt reddened (it was becoming a habit). James must have picked up the “b” word earlier, just before kissing him. Shit.

Of course, the kiss might be considered a positive reaction.

Pearl glanced at Matt and then James interestedly, and raised both her eyebrows. Matt looked away and ate his roll.

“And Benigna is interested in going with you when you leave?”

James hesitated momentarily. “She wants out of here. Whether she really wants to go with *us*, I don’t know.”

Benigna was making more noises behind her gag, pleading noises. James quirked one side of his lips at her. “She has quite the dirty little mind, from what I can tell. I think she feels it’s wasted here.”

“MMMMMPH!” Benigna was now glaring daggers at James. He quirked the other side of his lips. Matt almost felt sorry for her. Except she had almost exposed them to God knows what by stumbling in where she wasn’t wanted. That effectively killed his pity.

“Well, we gotta do something with her,” Carmella said.

Pearl chimed in. “We don’t particularly want to… eliminate her. But if she poses a threat….” Pearl shrugged.

Matt bet she was less dispassionate than she seemed. Carmella would probably eliminate Maligna, though, like a bad tumor (were there good tumors?).

Ah, scare tactics. Not his forte.

“But if she went with you, and we could trust her not to escape, that would solve all our problems.”

Benigna was nodding fervently, and making eager, agreeable noises. Clearly, she would happily go with them in order to avoid “elimination.” And probably the free porn she imagined she’d be getting on the trip.

James made a show of being reluctant. Matt let him have at it and wandered over to his tray to eat more. He was starving. Besides, James was better at emotionless badass than he was. When he wasn’t being nice. Strange that a guy who could be so nice could also come across as so callous when he needed to.

Soon, Benigna was free and breathlessly proclaiming her willingness to accompany them to Oregon, promising not to escape. James seemed to be buying it.

Carmella looked less than convinced. But she hauled Benigna away. “Come on, Maligna. We’re going to tell Mother Superior that you’re doing penance in my kitchen for the next two days. Two days?” she inquired, turning back.

“We shouldn’t leave any later, but if we can leave earlier, we might,” James answered. Pearl nodded.

Carmella looked satisfied with that. “So, you’ll be spending one to two days in the kitchen with me while I get you ready. I have *lots* of little jobs I think you’ll enjoy,” she purred, smiling maliciously.

Carmella and Benigna left, Benigna yammering on to Carmella about how she was fine with traveling with the two men, even if they were sodomites.

Matt choked on a carrot, and James had to whack him on the back. Which wasn't actually necessary, but probably made James feel like he was helping.

Once he caught his breath, Matt sat on the bed, pulling the food tray to himself, setting it in front of his crossed legs.

Pearl and James were trying not to seem like they were avoiding each other's eyes. Matt sighed. "Why do we need to leave within two days?" he asked, giving them a break. He could practically see Pearl's shoulders fall in relief.

"When I checked in this morning, Lance had arranged a rendezvous for us with a SpecOps/Contract team at Brownlee Dam. It's about thirty kilometers away, but we probably need to give ourselves two nights for travel. I don't know if we can find the horse again, and now we'll be dragging Maligna along."

"When's the rendezvous?"

"Fourth night from tonight at 0330. Two nights of travel should be plenty. The team'll create a distraction near the border crossing downstream from the damn, and we'll cross at the dam then. Because of the current no-fly truce they won't be able to cross the OR-ID border."

"So, I guess we should see how my wounds look." Matt sighed again.

"Yeah, we're going to have to swim for it, so you have to be healed enough to get across. The eco-terrorists only partially destroyed Brownlee Dam. We'll have to go through some swift water."

"No broken skin," Pearl clarified.

"I can't just dose up with anti-bionanos?"

"You could, but there are still parasitic bugs, not to mention pollutants."

Duh. “Shit,” he muttered. James came and sat next to him, sliding a hand around the back of his neck and giving him a squeeze.

“Won’t leave without you.” James seemed to think this should be comforting. His eyes widened in surprise when Matt’s instinctive reaction was to force him to go. “That’s not okay with you?”

“I want you out of this place! Where the RIA can’t ever stick you in one of their fucking camps again and fuck up your head anymore.”

“And on that note,” Pearl broke in uncertainly. James sighed and closed his eyes, his hand tightening on Matt’s neck again. Taking comfort now, not giving. Then he straightened up and let his hand slip off.

Matt’s neck felt cold.

“Maybe you should tell us what you know,” James suggested. He was expressionless again, and his voice was nearly a monotone.

Pearl looked down at her twisting hands. She took a chair when James indicated she should sit. “I was a research scientist for SOUF working in neural enhancements. Nothing intrusive; changes that could be brought about through medications or supplements. A few changes to the neural network that might be made through neurofeedback. Some of my work might have… pushed the envelope, but all of the troops were volunteers, and I never okayed a therapy if I wasn’t sure the risk outweighed the benefit for the individual.

“About seven years ago, I was appointed to a multidisciplinary SOUF team working on practical biocybe applications.” Pearl looked at them, finally. “It’s known that there’s more information available than the human brain is capable of capturing or processing. The team’s task was to develop a way for the human brain to process information

that normally can’t be processed—like the way we can’t see the UV spectrum. The specific goal was to capture and process brain waves.”

“So you and this team developed a way for soldiers to read them.” James was regarding her steadily.

“Yes.” She nodded slowly. “We came up with a hypothetical method of application, but only preliminary primate experiments were conducted. It was an implant, and while I was apprehensive, I knew we couldn’t avoid more invasive brain work eventually. I decided it was better if I was working with the scientists who were pushing those therapies than against the system, imposing at least some of my ethics. Others on the team agreed with me. But the implant blueprint was taken and immediately implemented in Psi-force troops.”

“Like me.” Even James’s voice was expressionless.

“Like you.” Pearl leaned forward and planted her elbows on her knees, looking intently at James. “The implant we designed was a programmable, organic framework. The brain can grow to work with the implant, but the implant itself can’t grow. The implant could be ‘enhanced’ later by introducing new programming. The initial programming—before implanting—would only need a portion of the implanted network to function.

“The biggest problem is that the organic implant could essentially reprogram itself in ways we couldn’t predict or control if ‘fed’ with other stimuli. Maybe even stimuli we aren’t even aware of, or don’t currently see as a danger. It has the potential to be very dangerous. Figuring out more about the specific dangers and stimuli was the objective of the next phase of testing. Unfortunately, some scientists on the team thought this feature was a plus.”

Matt shot off the bed. “This is what was done to James? Someone put this organic, unpredictable, untested

biocybernetic implant in him?”

“Either that, or something like it.” Pearl’s voice sounded dead now. Matt glanced at her. He could tell that she felt some kind of regret. He hoped James could feel it. He certainly deserved at least that from her.

“Why?” James’s voice came out rough and quiet.

Pearl seemed to understand what he was getting at. “Why the organic implant? If we could maintain enough control over it, it was actually safer for the recipient. No neural growth drugs or enhancers. The brain would connect to it at a natural rate with mental exercises only. We were working on designing out as much of the uncontrolled development of the network as possible. That was the dangerous part—I thought that was clear to them.”

“Them who?” Matt’s voice was sharp and words staccato in the tension-filled room.

“I don’t know.” Pearl’s voice was nearly a whisper. Tears slipped out of her eyes, but she didn’t seem to notice them. “I thought I knew, but I don’t think I ever did. I thought it was SOUFCOM, but our research disappeared, and our funding was cut. Our commanders seemed as out of the loop as we were. We were locked out of our labs and offices by federal agents. I don’t even know what agency.”

“Th’*FUCK*?” Matt was livid. “What the *fuck* did you do?!”

“I went up the chain as far as I could. Past SOUFCOM and into the Pentagon.” Pearl’s chin was trembling now. “I called Anais, and she went to bat for me, but even that didn’t help. It was completely black. No one could get any info. Major General Selkirk went to General Rami who went all the way to the fucking President when word came down from the Pentagon to shut down the program, but we were shut down cold anyway. I worked on the fucking thing and I didn’t have the clearance to even look at it anymore.” She

was rubbing the tears out of her eyes with the back of her hand.

“I don’t know for sure what version of what implant was placed in who, with what oversight or precautions. No one would even confirm it was implanted, but I had proof, an e-mail that was sent to me by accident. Such a stupid fucking way for someone to mess up! A misaddressed e-mail!” Pearl stopped her rant and took a deep breath, regaining some control.

“I shared it with the members of the team, and when we started to ask questions, that’s when we were locked out of our research. Everything was taken. Even notes. It was such a top-secret project, we were religious about keeping all the info at the facility we were working at. I don’t even have a backup of the e-mail. I was incredibly naive and trusting, even after twenty-three years in the military.” Pearl wound down suddenly, for the first time letting go of her rigid posture and flopping back in the chair, looking desolate.

“You have to take. It. Out.” Matt was so mad his hands shook, but he managed to keep himself from screaming it.

“I can’t.” It was a whisper. “It’s too dangerous. I don’t know what will happen. I can’t even do the work myself, anyway.”

Matt was pacing, running his hand through his hair. He forced himself to stop, look out the window, and shut up. It was James’s deal. He’d support him, no matter what.

Not that James was saying a word. Matt turned to look at him, still frozen on the side of the bed. There was no expression on his face, but no color either. Matt had only ever seen that pasty color on people going into shock. He came back to the bed and knelt in front of him. “James?’” Hesitantly, Matt pried one of James’s hands loose from his knee.

James looked into Matt’s eyes. Matt felt like someone was squeezing his heart in their fist. “Oh, baby.” He surged up and wrapped James in his arms, pulling him off the bed. He wasn’t sure James was even a physical comfort kind of guy, but Matt needed to give it too much to stop himself. He couldn’t even imagine what it would be like to find out your brain had been fucked with like this.

It took a few minutes, but James let his arms creep around Matt’s waist, gripping him so tightly Matt thought he would leave permanent finger marks. James started shaking, gripping tighter. Matt heard Pearl leave, but ignored her and just held James. It felt like hours, but finally, James began to relax. He pushed on Matt to make him let go, leaning back against the bed.

James had color in his face again. Some. He looked devastated. Matt wanted to start asking questions, find out how he was, but he didn’t think James was up for armchair psychology.

On the other hand, impulse control had never been his strong suit. “James—”

“Shut up, Matt. I can’t talk about it right now.” James’s voice was flat.

“Need anything?” Matt asked after a moment.

“Need to feel like I’m still here.”

He could do that.

Matt sat on his haunches in front of James and slipped his hands into James’s hair. He looked into James’s eyes and leaned forward to kiss him gently, nipping and sucking and licking. James responded, but barely. Matt worked at it more. Finally, he was in James’s mouth, twining his tongue around and around James’s, and James began to lean into him and open wider. He slipped a hand behind Matt’s head, gripping his neck and tilting him. Matt threw a leg over

James’s outspread thighs, straddling him, pressing against him.

He was hard. Matt scooted closer, grinding his own hardness against James’s. His fingers moved down James’s neck, to the seam seal on the front of his shirt.

He could feel some of that crisp, honey-colored hair there, right where the shirt seal aligned. Matt swirled his fingers a second, then unsealed it. He broke the kiss and looked down as he parted the shirt. James attacked the skin below his ear, and Matt gasped. God. Nipping teeth. “James,” he panted.

Matt let his palms rub across James’s pecs, pushing off his shirt. Mmmm, coarse hair just a shade darker than that honey-gold skin. He found James’s nipples, already hard brown nubs. James gasped against his ear when Matt pinched them lightly.

He needed to taste them. Matt skated his lips across stubble and down James’s muscular neck, nipping as he went, licking to soothe where his teeth had been. James panted, made a strangled sound in his throat.

Matt licked along a clavicle, swirled his tongue in that hair, and then skipped down. He licked a nipple, drawing a sharp sound from the back of James’s throat. Matt looked up, lips on one nipple and fingers on the other. All he could see was James’s chin, his head thrown back on the bed.

“Feels good,” James whispered at the ceiling. Matt decided if the man could form words, he wasn’t working hard enough at distracting him.

Matt dragged fingers down James’s stomach, tracing circles, finding his navel, then his happy trail, tugging on the hair and combing it with his short fingernails. James moaned. Matt let his hand drift slowly into James’s lap, finding and squeezing the hardness there. A groan this time. He smiled against James’s chest, and began to trace

down with his mouth, scooting his body back and kneading James's cock through his pants, unsealing his fly.

James had no shorts on. His hard cock sprang out of his camos as soon as they were open enough, foreskin mostly retracted. Matt ignored it for a second, and reached in for James's balls, caressing and cupping them, letting his fingers trace designs on the skin behind them. Then he ran his fingernails lightly up James's sac to the base of his cock, making James suck in a breath.

He was leaking pre-come out of the slit, the head purply-brown, with a thick ridge around its base. Matt shivered. He clenched his ass a little, thinking about what it would feel like inside him. "You up-to-date on vaccinations?" He asked James's cock.

"Yeah. Clean." This came from above him, not the cock. "You?"

"Yeah, 'm good. Clean." Matt gripped the thick shaft tighter, fisting James. Matt slid his hand up and down, slipping skin, but never touching James's head. Breathing on him. James moaned a little. "Do it, Matty," he whispered.

Matt's other hand was still lightly pinching James's nipple. He started to bring it down, but James caught it and put it back, pressing down hard, his hand over Matt's. Matt looked up at James, whose golden-brown eyes were nearly glowing. He'd never noticed before, but James had hawk's eyes. Matt shivered again, and looking into James's eyes, he took the head of his cock into his mouth.

James's mouth opened in a gasp. Matt sucked the corona, tonguing around his thick ridge. James moaned gutturally and let his head flop back on the bed. Matt smiled around his cock head and flicked his tongue into the slit, then dragged the tip across James's frenulum. James groaned, louder, and jacked his hips.

Matt took his mouth off and began to lick James, long wet licks up from the base to the head. When he was slicked all over, Matt took James back into his mouth. That same salty, sweet, musky taste welcomed him. He moaned a little around James. “Fuck,” James hissed.

Matt went for it—no more playing around. He pinched James’s nipples, alternating between them, and started sucking James’s cock in until he met his own fist, sliding back up, hollowing his cheeks, swirling his tongue around the head. James was panting. Matt’s fist was tight on him, sliding a counter-rhythm. His own hips were driving against the floor, his dick trapped in his pants, but he couldn’t be bothered to do anything for it right now.

Matt didn’t deep-throat. He’d never really learned how, at least partly from lack of desire. But when James put his hand in Matt’s hair, gripping it tightly, Matt let James push him down on his cock. He gagged a little. James let go immediately. “Sorry,” he whispered.

“No. I wanna. Make me, James.” Matt looked into James’s eyes, wanting James to read him. James studied him a second, all panting, flushed desire, and then put his hand back on Matt’s head. Matt sucked James’s cock back into his mouth, cheeks hollowing. He pressed lightly with the heel of his hand on James’s balls, keeping enough of his hand on the shaft to keep from going too far at first. He took a deep breath, but the smell of James made him groan all the air out right away. He had that almost yeasty smell Matt had never realized he liked so much.

James pushed down on his head, gently to start, barely gripping, but pushing him just to the edge of too far. Matt groaned. James shuddered. And did it again. Soon, he had one hand planted on the floor, one gripping Matt’s hair, and he was fucking his hips up into Matt’s mouth. Matt had saliva running down his chin and James’s cock, over his

hand. He couldn’t swallow, was fighting gagging, and he was more turned on sucking someone off than he’d ever been in his life. He moaned every time James’s prick got close to his throat, and it was making James moan and fuck him just a little deeper.

Finally, James went too far. Except Matt took him in. He felt James’s cock head dip that little extra bit, and he felt that ridge slip into his throat, and Matt started coming. He was moaning and humping the floor, coming in his pants. He swallowed convulsively around James, felt his throat muscles grip and massage James’s cock, and knew he’d be yelling if he didn’t have James in his throat. He drove his hips harder against the floor.

James cried out. He slammed his cock farther down Matt’s throat, shooting into him. His thighs were rock hard, shaking as he held Matt to him with a hand in his hair.

When James slipped out of Matt’s throat, he was still hard. Matt licked him everywhere, getting a hint of the bleachy come that James had pumped into him. Not that he needed the cleanup, but Matt wanted to run his tongue along that thick cock and around the head again. He sucked gently on James’s balls. Tasting that addictive smell. He wasn’t ready to let go. James was petting his head now. Matt pried his fingers loose from where they’d been gripping James’s thighs. When had he moved them? He flopped over on his back, panting.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Matt panted.

James flopped down next to Matt. He looked at him, panting in sync. He reached out a hand and placed it on Matt’s dick, still trapped in his pants. “You come?”

Damn, there was that blush again. “Yeah.” His voice sounded like he had something in his throat. Or maybe it was he’d had something in it. He grinned at James. James

leaned forward and kissed him, tasting himself in Matt's mouth. Matt shivered. So fucking hot.

"Mmmmmm." James smiled as he lay back down. Then he cleared his throat (and Matt knew *he* hadn't had anything in his throat). "Sorry I, uh…."

"'S'okay, James. I liked it. I've never done that before."

"What, gave head?" James had a little wrinkle between his eyebrows. Matt smiled at it.

"No. Came while I was doing it. Deep-throated."

"Was I too—?"

"James. Shut up. I came *because* you did that. Turns me on when you get all controlling like that. You must have been able to feel that at the time."

James's cheeks darkened a little. He didn't answer, just reached out and hauled Matt into his arms, tucking Matt's head under his chin. "Thank you," he said quietly.

Oh. Yeah. He'd done that because James was in shock over finding out his brain didn't belong to him anymore. Matt decided they didn't need to think about it anymore right now. "You're welcome. I guess you really are gay."

James snorted. It wasn't a completely amused snort. "Yeah, I'm gay. Don't know what the hell else I am anymore, but I'm still gay."

Matt sighed. He needed to work on his distraction skills.

He could do that.

—CHAPTER 14—

JAMES was awake when Pearl came back. He'd prodded Matt until he'd managed to get his pants off of him and get him into bed—Matt seemed inclined to fall asleep on the floor, with come in his pants—then lay down beside him, pulling Matt into his arms. James had never thought of himself as a cuddler. Apparently, after being given life-altering news, he was.

No, that wasn't true. He'd been kinda… nuzzly ever since Matt let James touch him. He remembered back over the past few nights, riding Miz in the dark while Matt rested, a warm weight on his chest. He'd been half-hard the whole time. And content. And last night, he'd wakened in the middle of the night, an arm thrown around Matt, a leg tucked between his.

Fine, Matt made him cuddly. At another point in his life that might have astonished him, but right now he wallowed in it as a way of not thinking about other stuff. Like if he was about to turn into somebody else when his brain went nuclear.

Was that even possible? He had too many questions and not enough information. He needed to talk to Pearl more. He'd been able to feel her the whole time she was talking, of course. She truly regretted what happened. Had felt guilty for her part in it, blamed herself for not being

able to stop it. But worse than all that was her fear for him and for the unknown consequences of having the implant.

Yeah, he needed to talk to her. He just didn't feel like getting up and finding her right now. He wanted to be next to warm, sleeping man. Warm Matt. Feeling almost safe tucked into this bed next to this body, with this shoulder blade to press his nose into. Secure. Maybe even a little bit loved.

James let himself drift on that drowsy warmth, not thinking. Well, he tried, and he even managed it occasionally. Fortunately, the "L" word was a great distraction.

Then he heard the door again. It was Pearl. Strange that he could tell stuff like that through walls now, where he couldn't before.

Ah, shit. No, it wasn't. Not strange at all. *Not thinking about it*.

She tapped softly before letting herself in. James pulled himself up to sit against the headboard and gave her a weary smile. She didn't even raise an eyebrow at his shirtless chest, or Matt curled into him. He felt no surprise from her.

"I didn't think you'd be too happy to see me anytime soon. If ever." She kept her voice down, since Matt was still asleep.

"Need answers." He shrugged. "I could tell you didn't much like what had happened, Pearl. 'S'okay."

She blew out a breath. "I'll give you all the answers I can, but I don't think I have many."

"Are you sure they implanted this device you helped design?"

She nodded matter-of-factly. "I think it's likely. I don't know of any other research being done in the same area, at

the same time in either the Red or the Blue. You got this done about three years ago?" James nodded. "James, tell me, did you volunteer for this?"

He'd like to lie to her, but it wouldn't help anything. "No," he told her quietly. "I'm a trooper. I was told to report and I did."

"What… what did they tell you they were going to do?"

"Nothing much, before. They told me afterward what they had done. I was pretty freaked, I guess. Then they told me it was reversible, it could be removed. So… I kind of got over it."

Pearl looked horrified. "It's become part of your neural network. Removing it could cause a cascade event. Maybe it could be done and leave you the way you were before, but it's far more likely to kill you. It's growing into you, or more, you're growing into it. Especially as you use it. They spent time teaching you to use it, right? Making you do exercises to integrate the implant?"

James nodded silently again.

"Jesus fucking Christ," she muttered. "Remove it my ass."

She surprised a snort of laughter out of James. "Aren't you a *nun*?"

"Yeah, but my god understands the need for bad language occasionally." She waved off his comment. They both sat staring into space for a few minutes.

"Pearl…." She waited patiently. "Can it change *me* into something else?"

She stared at him a very long time. He could feel sympathy, but not so much fear. More a sense of… understanding. Or knowing, maybe. "I don't think so, James. One of the things we've discovered recently is that the personality is more genetically based than we realized.

It also doesn’t just live in your brain. It’s one of the reasons the Singularity failed, because they focused solely on the brain.” It took James a minute. Oh, yeah. The cult that believed humans would integrate fully with technology and AI would become human.

“Since your brain makes the connections to the implant, a major change in who you are is very unlikely. I’d almost think it’s impossible. Your brain is interested in protecting itself.

“It’s not unusual for someone to change personality quite a bit after severe brain trauma, but that’s after a large section of the brain shuts down, or is destroyed. That’s not going to happen with the implant I worked on.

“My greatest worry is that it could create abilities we can’t imagine, maybe far beyond basic psychic abilities. Because it wasn’t lab-tested, we have no basis to predict results from.”

“So I’m the guinea pig.”

Pearl nodded slowly.

In reality, new, crazy psychic skills didn’t sound that bad. But he had a feeling he was only imagining a tiny part of the possibilities. That was *somewhat* better than he’d feared.

“That’s only the best-case if they used your blueprint.”

“There’s a kind of serendipitous quirk designed into the team’s implant that’s significant here.” James nodded at her to go on. “The implant would work best in a homosexual male brain. A woman could easily integrate it as well, but a het male might have difficulty.”

James raised an eyebrow. Pearl gave him a small smile. “It’s all about the size of the corpus callosum. It’s bigger in women and queer men. It worked well for our design because of how the implant would interact with the brain. I

feel it’s the safest design—for the individual with the implant—we could come up with.”

“Since I’m gay you think I probably have your implant.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Could just be coincidence.”

She gave him a sad smile. “Queer people only make up twelve percent of the population. The fact that the first soldier I’ve come across who has an implant like the one I helped design also happens to be gay gives me hope that it *is* the one I designed. It could be a coincidence, but I think it’s not.”

James sat up a little straighter. “I know at least one of the other guys that has the implant is also gay.”

“You know other soldiers that have it?” Pearl looked stunned. This quickly gave way to excitement. “Can you give me their names? Wait, don’t tell me, tell Anais. She’ll be better at coordinating this. I’d rather not know and get caught by the RIA, God forbid.”

Pearl’s voice was getting louder as she got worked up, and Matt was stirring against James’s side. With a sleepy mumble he hid his head under James’s lats.

James was having a hard time getting as excited over this as Pearl. “It’s like reverse discrimination.” He knew his voice had gone hard. Matt grumbled a little, so James put a hand on his back.

“What?” Pearl looked confused as hell.

“Reverse discrimination. It’s what they used to call it when someone received preferential treatment just for being of a specific minority group. Although this isn’t exactly preferential treatment.”

He could feel her guilt coming back, double strength. “Oh, God,” Pearl moaned, and buried her head in her hands. “Now I feel even worse.” She didn’t say it for sympathy. James was pretty sure she didn’t even realize what she was saying. He could feel Matt next to him, unnaturally still. James gave him a little squeeze.

“Pearl, I can’t absolve you of guilt. But I believe you didn’t mean to hurt anyone because they’re gay.” That was probably the best he could do for her. He knew he sounded stiff. It needed to be said, though.

Matt relaxed a little. He started to push himself up. “Gah! Left arm,” he muttered, laying back down and rolling onto his back so he could use his right arm. “Hey Pearl,” he said somewhat dully. James could feel Matt was a little angry with her, even though he believed she was sincere.

Pearl nodded and gave Matt a weak smile. “There’s a more immediate concern we need to talk about before you check in tonight, James.”

“We’re checking in tonight?” Matt asked through a yawn. He gingerly stretched his arms over his head and arched. James watched the muscles move in his back. When he arched like that, it really showed off his ass, at least from James’s vantage point. He was still covered with the blanket in front but James could see acres of Matt’s bare, pale skin from where he was. Matt had his arms over his head, and was gripping his hands together. It made all the muscles and veins in his forearms pop. James wondered how long it would take him to trace them all with his tongue.

Or he could lick his way down Matt’s spine to the end, right between those perfect cheeks…. Suddenly he realized Matt was waiting for an answer. His eyes flew up to Matt’s. Predictably, Matt was smirking at him. Busted. He quirked a smile at Matt.

“Yeah. Um, 2345 we call in.” He knew Matt would like the check-in time. “We’ll have to leave here at about 2300 to make sure we get to the phone on time. You’ll have to go in drag, I guess.” He didn’t even bother trying to get Matt to stay here.

“Phone?” Matt was looking at him like he was nuts.

“You’ll see.” He grinned.

“You need to get out of the military,” Pearl broke in, redirecting his attention.

Both Matt and James stared at her.

“You’re in danger as long as you stay in. I think it’s likely that they’ll start trying to force your implant to make more connections. I don’t think that’s safe for you. Once the implant goes beyond its original programmed parameters it’s more likely to happen again.”

“Oh, fuck!” Matt looked horrified, jerking upright, his mouth open in shock, staring at James. “You haven’t told her?”

James shook his head. He looked at Matt because he didn’t want to look at Pearl.

“Pearl, they did something to James in the re-education camp—”

“I can tell her,” James broke in gruffly. Matt looked back at him and nodded. “They did something to me in re-education camp,” he said, lamely. Matt rolled his eyes and gave the “go on” gesture. “Uh, I don’t know what happened. I went into my assigned ‘therapist’s’ office and he started a vid and I woke up two hours later. Then it started happening regularly until I got out—they’d drag me into that office and I’d pass out. Maybe twelve times, total?”

They’d all been briefed on Red re-education procedures, and no one had ever reported a regular pattern

of losing consciousness as part of the process. It was just another thing James had been putting off thinking about until he got home. Although he was starting to wonder how he'd deal at home, anyway. He could feel Pearl thinking across the room. "Did you ever see any vids?"

"No." Watching educational vids was a standard part of every Red re-education. He didn't remember seeing any. James swallowed uncomfortably.

"We've known the vids were a brainwashing tool, but without an actual example we've never been sure of the specific mechanism. Certainly it has to be made up partly of hypnosis and suggestion-planting. Maybe it reacted with your implant, somehow. Can you tell me how your abilities have changed?"

"Um, I have considerable range in the open, as long as there's no physical barrier between me and the subject. I can sometimes pick up a word or two, when before I never could. I can… influence people, I guess. If they're considering something but resisting it, I can push them into doing it or saying it."

Pearl had been nodding until he got to the last one. Her eyes went wide, but she didn't say anything.

"You can talk to animals," Matt reminded him, dryly.

James flushed. "Yeah, that," he muttered.

"You mean, you can communicate with them, as in two-way, mind-to-mind communication?" He could feel Pearl's professional interest overriding her concern. She was fighting it, but losing with the new information he'd given her. "With *animals*?"

"Yeah." James picked at the blanket. He could just see Matt's smile out of his peripheral vision.

He'd show the bastard amusing later. He gave Matt a sour look, but Matt just smiled more broadly.

Pearl was silent a long time. Finally she said, “It seems that you’re developing two-way communication skills we never intended the implant be programmed to develop. The other stuff, the range and increased perception of individual thought, those are just an extension of the original program.” She paused. “In my professional opinion, your implant has jumped beyond the initial programming. If the programming is what we originally planned.”

“That’s bad.” James was ignoring the possibility that this wasn’t Pearl’s implant, for now.

“Yes. It *definitely* means you can’t have the implant removed, James. You’ve started to grow the implanted network further into your brain, and might even be connected to areas we don’t fully understand. Did these new skills develop immediately, or slowly over time?”

“Slowly. They’re still developing. I figured out today I can sometimes pick up brain waves through doors, if someone’s really close. It’s pretty muted.”

Pearl heaved a sigh. “That’s not good. I don’t see how that can be a logical progression of two-way communication. So it could be you’re developing a third subset of skills. The fact that it’s progressing slowly is both good and bad. It’s good, because it means your brain was given time to grow into the implant naturally and wasn’t forced. It’s bad because we don’t know what in particular is pushing the continuing growth. Do you think they knew something was wrong in re-education camp?”

James looked at Matt. Matt looked worried, and felt a little scared. He was still keeping himself open to James, which he appreciated more than Matt could know. It was somehow easier getting through this conversation having Matt there.

“Yeah, they knew.” James cleared his throat. He was still looking at Matt.

Matt must have realized he didn’t really want to talk about it, so he continued for James. “They put an extra tracker on him, and were uplinking data on his biorhythms and maybe brain waves. Didn’t you say they knew you were losing consciousness?”

James nodded. “After that first session, I always came to in a bed, with some kind of brain scan equipment. I was groggy, and it didn’t even click until later, after I was out.”

“They were keeping really close tabs on him too. Oh, hey! You could affect the signal the chips sent out, too, remember?”

“Yeah.” James nodded, and realized somehow his hand had ended up in Matt’s, fingers entwined. He wondered idly if he’d ever held hands with a guy before.

Pearl broke in. “That’s probably normal development. Chips send out waves, which aren’t that much different than brain waves. It’s something we thought could happen. Do you know if it happened before then?”

James shook his head.

Just then there was a knock on the door. Pearl cautiously approached it, reaching into her robe, presumably for a weapon. James raised an eyebrow and looked at Matt. Who knew the nun was packin’ heat? “It’s Carmella,” he told Pearl. He was sure *she* was packing. Matt’s lips lifted at the corners. James yanked him forward and pressed his lips to one of those little lines Matt got when he smiled.

Jesus, he was a sap. Matt gave him a little nudge with his nose and then pulled away just as Carmella came into the room with a big covered container.

“Dinner,” she announced. “I made sure Maligna didn’t spit in it when she was preparing your trays.” She smiled delightedly, clearly enjoying torturing the young nun.

Matt may have only eaten a couple of hours ago, but he fell on his dinner like he was starving. It was chicken, maybe raised at the convent. Beat the MREs all to shit. James ate his more slowly as they talked.

Pearl brought Carmella up to speed, and they discussed the more immediate options available to them. Carmella knew all about the implant. James figured he’d stretched “need-to-know” all out of shape until it was unrecognizable.

Not that he was feeling too loyal to SOUF right now.

“You can’t stay in the military,” Carmella announced decisively, recalling his attention. Matt snorted and said something unintelligible through a mouthful of bread. James could tell by the tone he was agreeing with Carmella, backed up by a dose of derision riding his brain waves. The bread crumbs Matt spewed across the bed punctuated the sentiment.

James sighed. He’d seen clean sheets in the closet next to the front door.

“Sah-wee,” Matt said. His cheeks were puffed out with bread and chicken. James snorted.

“I think Anais and Lance might be able to swing a medical discharge for you,” Carmella offered.

“But is the Blue going to let me walk away from them with a bunch of top-secret tech in my head? Doubt it.”

“What’s the alternative?” Matt shrugged. He’d managed to swallow his food. Everyone stared at him. James waited for Matt to get it. “Oh *fuck* no!” Matt was horrified. “We’ll leave, James. Go to Canada or somewhere

that doesn’t have an extradition agreement. I’m not letting them just… you know….”

James could feel Matt stronger than ever. He leaned his head back against the wall, tipping it up so he could keep his eyes from overflowing. Matt meant it. He’d go with him, keep him safe if he could. He *wanted* to. James hoped the feeling ached in Matt’s chest the same way it ached in his. That want.

Pearl got up, signaling Carmella unobtrusively. “I’ll come with you tonight. I need to talk to Anais and Lance too. We’re going to work this out.”

Nobody said anything further.

Matt laced his fingers through James’s again once Carmella and Pearl were gone. “C’mere,” he whispered, tugging. James let himself be pulled. Into Matt’s arms, onto his chest. Avoiding the bandages.

James shut off his brain. He stopped thinking, and just let himself feel. He felt Matt’s fingers combing through his hair. He felt Matt’s muscles slide under his ear as he moved his arm. Matt’s hand on his back, fingers splayed, pressing James into him. Matt’s lips brushed his forehead.

James closed his eyes and sighed. He tightened his arms around Matt and let himself feel deeper. Matt’s concern and worry, and fear. It felt so good, like light surrounding him. Not the emotions, but the fact that someone—Matt—felt that for *him*. James.

James nuzzled his forehead and nose into Matt’s chest. He didn’t care if Matt made him cuddly or made him hornier than he’d ever been or even made him a lovesick fool. James was keeping him. Hopefully Matt would want to keep James too.

—CHAPTER 15—

BEFORE leaving that night, they took a shower. James was sort of amazed they could do it without the situation devolving into sex, but between Matt needing to keep his bandages dry-ish and James needing comfort, it didn't happen.

Not that he didn't feel Matt up. All over. And bite and lick the back of his neck a lot when he figured out how crazy it made Matt. But then Matt turned around to James, leaned against the wall, and pulled him in.

Matt could kiss. James had never been into kissing that much. It was just a sometimes necessary way station on the road to the good stuff. But with Matt it *was* the good stuff.

Matt explored his mouth, slowly, touching James in places he never thought he'd find erotic. Who knew a guy running his tongue along your teeth could feel so good? But it was the long, slow, sinuous tongue action that made James forget everything except being in that warm, wet mouth. He felt like he'd reached a transcendent state.

Then Matt started skating his hand down James's torso, pinching his nipples until he gasped, moving lower to dip a finger in his navel, then circling a hip with a fingertip. Still kissing him the whole time. James had never known slow and teasing worked for him. But it clearly did.

Matt’s fingers starting tangling in James’s pubic hair, his mouth sucking James’s earlobes and licking and nipping his jaw. Matt hooked a thumb and finger around the base of James’s shaft and squeezed. James sucked in a breath and looked down to watch Matt’s hand.

Matt’s forearm was disappearing between his legs, the veins and tendons standing out on the underside of his wrist. His fingers cupped James’s balls, weighing them. Somehow his forearm looked both fragile and masculine at once. Like Matt was a precision instrument, finely tuned. A finely tuned man pressing gently up on James’s balls with the heel of his hand, his fingers pressing circles into James’s perineum.

Fuck transcendent states. He’d achieved Nirvana.

Until the instant-hot ran out of juice. The water went from steamy to icy in a couple of seconds. Matt yelped and jumped out of the shower, leaving James to deal with the water.

But Matt stood in the bathroom with a towel, waiting for him when he got out. He dried James off slowly, occasionally kissing him still, relaxing him and bringing him down.

“C’mon, sexy. You need to get dressed,” Matt said in his ear. James felt almost as relaxed as he would if they’d gone ahead and fucked. Cold water notwithstanding.

“Mmmmm,” he rumbled. He caught Matt when he moved away, slipping his hands around his waist and resting them in the small of his back. Resting his forehead on Matt’s. “Thank you.”

Matt kissed him again. James let him pull them into the main room and lead him to the packs. Then they got dressed.

Matt went for jeans. “You sure you should go with us?” James asked him. He had to at least give it a try.

“Yeah. It’ll make Anais and Lance feel better, trust me. Maybe they’ll start trusting you more.”

James couldn’t deny that would be a nice thing. “You sure you shouldn’t go in drag?” He was only half joking.

“No one’s going to believe you packed your wife off to go hunting in dresses. As long as I keep my head covered, these are fine.” Matt slapped a leg on his thigh, indicating the denim jeans.

“Not with your ass.”

“What are you trying to say about my ass?”

James couldn’t believe how touchy the guy could get about his body. He didn’t know why; Matt had a seriously hot body, and he must know it. Or at least been told by every guy who ever wanted to get him into bed. Which must be, like, every guy.

“I’m saying you have a very nice, very sexy, very tight, very *male* ass.”

“Women’s asses are different?” Matt was looking over his shoulder, trying to see his butt.

James stared at him a second. “You’re *really* gay, aren’t you?”

Matt looked up at him. He lost the fight to keep the grin off his face. “Fine, I knew women had different asses, but I forget. I just don’t look at them.” His smile slipped. “You notice, don’t you?”

James studied him a minute as he pulled on his shirt. Was that a touch of jealousy? Matt had shut the flow of info from his brain off when they left the bathroom.

“Yeah.” No point in lying. “But I don’t generally want to sleep with women. I did in high school, yeah, but it wasn’t a big deal even then. I don’t think I was ready to be gay, yet. I still look, but it’s more like… artistic appreciation. Not attraction.”

“Huh.” Matt turned and started dressing again.

James sighed and sealed his shirt front. “You might want to leave your shirt off. Pearl will probably be here early to change your bandages.”

“You just want to look at my naked flesh.” Matt smirked.

James grinned at him. “Hell, yes.” He moved forward, but just then he could feel Pearl coming. He dropped the hand he’d been reaching for Matt with and turned toward the door.

Pearl knocked on the door and then let herself in. She smiled at Matt. “Oh, good, you’re waiting for me. Did James tell you I was coming?”

“Um, yeah, sorta.” Matt smiled at her. James wondered what it was that put Matt into such a relaxed mood.

Actually, why the hell was *he* feeling so relaxed? He was starting to think the man bewitched him on a regular basis. Under the circumstances, they should both be amped.

Pearl had Matt on the bed and was peeling off the old patches. She hummed approvingly. James went over to take a look. Matt’s arm was almost closed up, and his shoulder didn’t look like meat so much. Now it looked like a bad, but healing, wound. Everything was pink and tender-looking or scabbing over, but it was healing really fast, thanks to the nano-menders.

“Looks good. Might be able to leave tomorrow.”

“Not that soon,” Pearl argued with him.

“If he’s going to be healed by the time we get to the river, we’re fine.”

“He’s going to need to be closed up before he leaves here. He won’t heal as fast once he’s walking all night and can’t take nano-menders.”

“If I can find Miz—”

“Can we argue about this tomorrow?” Matt broke in. He stood up, frowning now, and went to put on his shirt. The shirt was too big for him, making him sort of (if you squinted and it was dark) look like he *could* be a woman wearing her husband’s shirt. A kinda butch woman. But the shirt partially obscured that ass.

James realized it was one of his shirts. Well, shit, that just made Matt sexier.

Matt pulled on a hat, the kind James had seen women all over Idaho wear. It looked sorta floppy with a wide brim that partially obscured his face. It helped, making Matt look like he could pass as a woman even if you weren’t squinting. He’d still need the dark to pull it off.

“There a moon tonight?” Matt asked.

“Just a sliver. You’re believable.”

Matt grinned at him as Pearl headed to the door. James gave him a partial smile back. “C’mon, wife.”

Matt stuck out his tongue and stepped out the door ahead of James. James walked behind him, playing peekaboo with Matt’s ass.

MATT thought he might be falling in love with James. Maybe he was already there. He’d never felt quite like this before.

He'd definitely been in deep like, and plenty of lust. But not this.

The best part was he thought it might be a two-way thing. He'd been preparing himself for a brief, hot affair that would end when James wanted it to—soon, probably—and then Matt would have a lot of tequila and ice cream floats (combining steps one and two when recovering from a broken heart—Sabine had discovered that a while ago), suck a couple of guys off in the bathroom stall at the air base, and mope a while. Maybe go on a couple of benders with his male cousins. Not that they were any damn use when it came to breakups. For a bunch of queers, they carried around a lot of testosterone.

This was not what he'd prepared himself for. In the shower, when they'd been kissing, Matt felt like they were melting into one person. Like maybe their spirits were communing through their tongues.

Wow. That was… poetic. And kinda weird.

He was careful not to think about it too much. It was kinda mushy, for one thing, and for another, even if James felt it with the same intensity, Matt wasn't sure he had any idea it was happening. Or if he would even be okay with it happening.

The most important reason for not thinking about it was that he knew he was having a harder time keeping things from James—he could feel the brain waves leaking out of his walls—and Matt was trying not to let James know how much or deeply he felt. He had to work on those mental walls. They were trying to crumble.

He just rode the high and didn't think too much for the moment. And he let James feel some of that warmth and contentment because he thought it was helping him get through the mess his life had become.

They left the prefab and stayed out of the well-lit areas of the convent grounds. Pearl kept them to a sedate strolling walk (which James wasn't particularly adept at), tucking her hands into the sleeves of her long habit. Just some relatives, catching up on a nice night, strolling along. Nothin' to see here, Sister.

Pearl took a rambling path to a gate in the eastern wall, where a "gardener" was lounging conspicuously. Matt could practically feel James's suppressed snort. He dipped his head, hiding his smile, and looped his arm through his "husband's."

Pearl greeted the man, and judging by their cryptic exchange it seemed he was under her influence. Possibly a Blue agent, but Matt thought not. Probably just bought and paid for.

Blue tax dollars at work. Or NACC tithing, more likely.

Matt's suspicion was confirmed when Pearl slipped the man something just before he opened the gate for them and let them out.

"He's letting us go because he trusts me not to be doing anything truly nefarious. And for the money, of course. Don't trust him yourselves," she warned in a low voice once they were away from the wall.

"What would he consider truly nefarious?" Matt couldn't help asking.

"Sneaking two fugitives from the RIA out to contact an agency in the Blue that's assisting their escape. That kind of thing." Judging by her voice, Pearl was enjoying herself. Probably her career in R&D hadn't allowed for a lot of playing spy.

It took a while to walk to the abandoned gas station on the nearby highway that they were apparently aiming for. Matt was starting to flag, and he was relieved when they

got there and he could stop. James looked at him sharply, but wisely kept his comments to himself.

“So, what’s here?” Matt clamped his lips shut when he realized how out of breath he sounded.

Pearl pointed to a strange-looking square column poking out of the ground next to the wall of the abandoned building. It had some kind of boxlike structure attached to the top half, with an open side and bottom. As they approached it, he saw there was something in the box.

“Is that a *pay phone*?” He’d seen a few before, but they were obsolete oddities. You only ever saw them… at abandoned structures just like this, actually. Or in museums.

Pearl was grinning so big the minimal moonlight glinted off her teeth. “In case no one has ever mentioned it, Lance is a resourceful guy.”

“I’ve noticed.” Matt’s voice was dry. How could he have worked for QESA almost three years and never come across this before? It explained how Lance ended up with all those contracts to pass com on from Blue agents, though.

There was no vid, but it was a secure communication because you couldn’t scab on the waves. It relied largely on ground lines that had been laid more than one hundred years ago and then abandoned. Once the initial footwork was done and the abandoned pay phones with viable communication paths still intact were identified, it took very little maintenance and very little encryption. The quality varied, and occasionally someone, somewhere, destroyed a connection and it was lost, but for the time being it worked well.

Matt picked up the handset at Pearl’s urging and held it awkwardly to his ear. “Gah!” he yelped, and dropped it. It

fell to the end of its little cord and hung there, making that strange, high-pitched droning sound. “What the hell is that noise?”

“It’s called a dial tone.” James was smirking. “It’s how you know you have an open line.”

“Th’fuck,” Matt muttered. He turned on James. “What did you do when you heard it?”

Pearl laughed. “Pretty much what you just did. Except he took cover.”

“Thought it was an alarm,” James muttered sheepishly.

“You’re really enjoying this, aren’t you?” Matt scowled at Pearl.

She shrugged. “Yeah, Carmella did it to me when I came here. I’ve been waiting years for a victim.”

“I only had to wait a day.” James sounded downright gleeful.

Matt snorted, sounding alarmingly like James to his own ears, and picked up the handset. “’S not working,” he reported after standing there a minute. He turned and looked. Pearl was grinning again, and James was back to smirking. “’Kay, *now* what?”

“You have to dial the number.”

Matt blinked. Duh. People still had com numbers. Except…. “What’s the number?” It was only ten digits, no letters or symbols. Old school all the way. He listened to the phone ring after a number of strange clicks and pauses.

“Hello?” shouted a voice in his ear.

“Jesus! I can hear you; you don’t need to shout.”

“Matt?” It was Grampa Lance. “It’s good to hear your voice, son.” Oh, God, he was calling him son. He could tip into sentimental any second.

“Yeah, Grampa, good to hear you, too.” Matt took a gamble that calling him Grampa would satisfy Lance’s emotional needs rather than invite him to become more maudlin. Either things were dire, or it worked, because Lance got down to business.

“Are you healing?”

“Almost there. Maybe two days and no broken skin.”

“Good. Can’t have you in the river with an open wound. We can’t get a Feng Niao bird in to pick you up ’til you’ve humped thirty-two klicks past the river.”

“Thirty kilometers is, like, a day of hard walking. I can do that.” Matt knew he might not be able to, but he had a weird faith that James would get him out of this. He glanced at James. The guy was giving him a piercing look, like he knew what Matt was thinking.

Or he was thinking Matt was nuts for thinking he could walk that far after swimming the Snake. Matt turned away and shut his mind down tight. He didn’t care what James thought. He would paddle his way across the Snake with his tongue and crawl forty kilometers if it would get James out of this fucking place.

“Matt, don’t push it. I’m trusting James to keep you safe.” Matt raised his eyebrows. They did trust James. Sorta. “Don’t jeopardize his testicles, Matt. I’m getting the impression you want him fully functioning, and Anais will take him down if anything happens to you.” Or Lance was trying to manipulate him. Relatively successfully.

“How do you know how I feel about his testicles?” he hissed.

“Your faith in him gave it away. When you refused to believe he wasn’t who he said he was, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary?”

“Oh. That.”

“Should I get the sit rep from James or you?”

Oh, dammit all. Why front? “James is in a better position to give you that.”

“And he told you the POA?”

“Yeah, got the plan.”

“Okay. Don’t hang up. Sid wants to talk to you. Take care, son.”

Grampa Sid? Good lord. He was being coddled via telephone.

“Matt?”

“Grampa?”

“Don’t be a smartass.”

“How is that being a smartass? I called you Grampa.” Grampa Sid didn’t usually sound so annoyed with him. Usually.

“You’re goddamned lucky it’s me checking up on you and not your mother. I had to argue with her for forty-five minutes on vid to get her to stay in Weimer and wait for you there. By the way, guess where you’re going soon as you get out of Idaho?” he added conversationally.

“You couldn’t tell her I’m an adult and this is part of my job?”

“No. She’s my daughter, dumbass. And your mother. She’s more worried than we are. The only thing keeping her there is knowing you’re coming to see her first. You wanted your family to find out about the shit hitting the fan after it was all over, you shoulda hired-on somewhere else.”

“I’ll keep that in mind when my contract’s up.”

“You don’t have a contract, Matt.” Grampa’s voice was smug. Matt stuck his tongue out at the handset. “I heard that,” Sid shot back.

He was fucking psychic.

“I had grandparents once, too, you know.”

Or, you know, just experienced. Matt sighed. “Grampa,” he said in a forcibly calm voice. “Was there something in particular you wanted to ask me?”

“Yeah. We’ve done some looking into Lieutenant James Ayala’s service record. I approve.”

“What is *with* you people? How did you know?” He decided denying it was pointless.

“I’m psychic.” Matt snorted. If Sid was, it was the first he’d heard about it, and he’d been close to the Grampas his whole life. “Lance needs to talk to Ayala, now.”

“Okay.” Matt was happy to hand over the phone.

“I love you, son.” Grampa said it just before Matt passed the phone to James. Sentimental old bastard was gonna make him teary.

James was looking at him with concern when he took the handset. Matt checked, and sure enough, he was leaking brain waves to James. Dammit, ever since he’d had sex with the guy he’d had a hard time controlling that.

James took the handset and slipped his other hand around Matt’s neck, squeezing it comfortingly. Matt sighed and gave in to it. He rested his head on James’s shoulder and listened to his conversation with Lance.

“Yes, sir,” James said crisply into the phone. An unintelligible answer, then James started to explain the situation. How they had excess baggage (Benigna), the state of Matt’s injuries (hadn’t he already covered that?), James’s estimate for time to the rendezvous, his estimation

of problems and needs. Fairly quickly Matt zoned out, and the next thing he knew, James was nudging him toward the wall of the old gas station, and Pearl had the phone, talking sci-speak with Anais.

James kept his arm around Matt's waist, holding him carefully until Matt had managed to lower himself to the cracked cement and lean against the wall. James looked like he'd like to sit next to him, but didn't.

"Sit down," Matt said. Then he cringed inside at the pleading note in his voice. In the next instant he decided it didn't matter. He was going balls to the wall with James, so the guy may as well know that he craved him. Not just the sex, but the little things like this.

"Can't, baby," James rumbled at him. "Need to keep an eye out. We're right next to the old highway."

Oh, well that made sense. Matt could see across the asphalt where some tall electric lights had been placed, to illuminate the place. Thank God they weren't working now. The electricity had either been cut off or the lights had been tampered with, because they were dark. Probably never re-sourced after the dam was blown up by eco-terrorists. And of course no one would bother hooking it to the local waste-gas energy grid.

Baby. That was nice.

James leaned against the wall next to him, still standing. Matt reached out and circled James's ankle with his hand, leaning his head against James's thigh. He let himself drift. He was still so tired.

James's hand on his head, shaking gently, brought him back. Pearl was off the phone, and they were both looking at him.

"We ready to head back?" Matt asked.

“Yeah.” James reached down and grabbed him around the biceps, helping him up.

He didn’t remember a lot of the walk back. James kept an arm around him, helping him, he supposed. Mostly the arm just felt warm and comforting. He heard James and Pearl talking very quietly. Something about discharges and falsified medical records and something about the Boulder Blue cell. He couldn’t remember.

And suddenly they were in the room, James’s strong hand on the small of his back, lowering him to the bed. He’d had to carry him? Had Matt fallen asleep or lost consciousness? “Shh, baby,” James said when Matt tried to ask. He helped Matt undress.

He vaguely remembered Pearl putting another IV vial in his arm, telling him she needed to feed the nano-menders. Then it was all fog until he felt James’s weight dip the bed behind him. He scooted back, snuggling his ass into James’s hips. James rumbled at him, and held him tight.

“Go to sleep, baby.”

Fine, he’d rest a bit, but then he had plans for James.

—CHAPTER 16—

MATT couldn't believe he'd fallen asleep the night before. He'd been so exhausted he'd somehow passed out, even with James spooning him, his hard dick up against Matt's (very happy) ass.

When Matt woke up, he was on his back. The same hard dick was nudging his hip, and his own was valiantly pushing up the heavy blankets. He could feel warm sun on his chest and shoulders, and fingernails tracing across his abs and pecs, following the muscle contours. The touch slowly, teasingly, got closer to his nipple.

Matt lay there with his eyes closed, picturing James's honey-tanned hand, fingers gliding across him. He could feel his nipples hardening in anticipation, and then a single fingernail tracing circles around his left nipple, not quite touching the areola. Sandpapery whiskers brushed his left shoulder, around his bandage. "Mmmmm." He stretched a little, arching his back, smiling, trying to move so that finger would touch him where he wanted it.

He felt James's rough lips gently brush his shoulder, hovering so he wouldn't hurt Matt. "Are you picturing it? My fingers on your nipple? Want it, Matt?"

God, this meta-communication rocked.

"Watch." James's voice was rumbly and rough, like his whiskers and lips. Matt opened his eyes at James's command. James skated a finger across the tip of his

nipple, then again, sending shock waves of sensation through him.

Matt made a low sound in the back of his throat. “James.” James licked up his neck to his ear.

“Tell me what you want, Matt.” His voice was low and seductive, but Matt could hear the note of command in it. He nearly shuddered from it. So he was a submissive slut, sue him.

“Want you to fuck me,” he said, turning his head to look into James’s eyes. James looked back, making that rumbly sound Matt swore he could feel in his chest.

“Yeah, Matt. I wanna fuck you. How do you want it?” He pinched Matt’s nipple suddenly. Matt arched his back and made a high, whiny sound. If he wasn’t so fucking turned on, he’d be embarrassed.

“On my stomach,” he panted. “Wanna feel your weight on me. Want you to bite my neck.”

Matt watched James’s eyes flare with heat and a little bit of surprise.

In the next second, James was over him, forcing his tongue into Matt’s mouth. He was heat and slippery, twisty possession. Fucking almost into Matt’s throat with his tongue. Matt moaned, wishing it was James’s prick. Except he wanted it up his ass even more.

James gripped Matt’s hands, holding them up by his head. James was trying not to get too rough, careful of his injuries. Matt didn’t give a flying fuck about his injuries right now. He arched up into James’s body, bringing their chests together, feeling James’s nipples and crinkly hair slide across his super-sensitized skin.

James ground down into Matt, already naked, sliding his heavy, hot erection in the join between his thigh and pelvis, grinding his hard prick alongside Matt’s. Matt

hooked his legs around James's, sliding them up to his thighs, then higher. He wanted to be as open to him as possible, to feel James's dick dragging across his hole. Matt's sphincter clenched convulsively at the thought.

James slid his body down, letting his dick drag down Matt's, past his balls—already alarmingly tight—and his perineum, poking at it a little, then pressing against his hole through his shorts.

"Fuuuuuuck." Matt was writhing, held down by James's body and hands. James scraped his stubble along Matt's neck, biting his earlobe. "Uhn. James."

"Think this might be all the foreplay you get, Matt." James was panting.

"Don't care. Go."

James laughed a little, breathlessly. "You still have shorts on. And you're on your back."

"Don't care. Just fuck me, James." Matt looked up into James's eyes, very serious. James let go of Matt's hands and sat back, hooking fingers into his waistband and roughly yanking down Matt's undershorts.

With his hands free, Matt immediately reached for James's cock. He grabbed it around the shaft, skating his fingers around the head. Fuck, James felt big. Wide. Matt fucking loved being stretched around a wide cock. He moaned, fisting James, letting his head drag across his palm.

James froze with Matt's shorts still around his thighs. "Matty, you gotta stop." The silk over steel of James was too seductive to let go. Matt gripped the shaft harder, squeezing it experimentally. He could feel pre-come on his leg. He circled the top of James's head, slipping his fingers around and around. "Matt. Let go, now. Put your hands back up by your head and don't move them or I stop." Fuck,

that voice was so hot. Matt bit his lip as he followed James's orders.

James yanked Matt's shorts off the rest of the way. Then he sat back on his haunches, looking down at him. Matt felt James's eyes like a touch. His nipples pulled up even tighter. He whined a little, sliding the backs of his thighs over the tops of James's, feeling the rough hair. James was all rough stimulation, sharp and raw.

James clamped his hands on Matt's legs, not letting him move. "So hot, baby." James's voice was so rumbly Matt almost couldn't understand him.

Matt had never felt this out of control. He couldn't hold still, arching his back and grinding his groin into air. He managed to keep his hands where James told him, but that was the extent of his control.

"How long?" James asked him roughly. How long since he'd been fucked?

"Um, couple months. James, please. Want you in me."

James let go of Matt's leg, sliding the fingers of one hand into Matt's mouth. "Suck." Matt swirled his tongue around James's thick fingers while James watched. When they were slippery he traced them slowly down the center of Matt's body, between his legs, into his crack.

Matt arched up, bringing his legs back as far as he could without gripping them. James leaned forward and pressed a forearm against the back of Matt's thighs, forcing his legs back more. He circled Matt's hole, holding him still with the arm across his thighs.

The further loss of control made Matt even wilder. "James, please," he panted. James slipped a finger into Matt. "God!" Matt clenched around his finger, wanting more. James slipped in the second finger. It stung a little, adding to Matt's excitement.

“Don’t wanna hurt you, Matt. Need something slick.” James head was bent, looking down at his fingers pushing into Matt’s ass. “God, Matt,” he moaned softly. Then he pulled his fingers out and was leaning over the side of the bed.

“James?” What th’fuck was he doing? Matt started to lower his legs.

“Don’t move,” James snapped. He came back up, something in his hand. Matt tilted his hips and spread his legs, grinning at James. “Is that butter?”

James nodded. He reached for Matt, shoving both fingers back in. Matt gasped at the intrusion and arched up, planting his feet. James growled at him, pushing his legs back with his forearm until Matt’s hips were held in the air.

“Mmmmm, looks so hot, Matty. My fingers fucking you.” James slipped a third finger inside, forcing them up past the second knuckle, just on the edge of too much burn. He slid them out partway, spread wide, pushing past Matt’s prostate with the tip of one finger. Matt sucked in a sharp breath.

James played a few minutes, fucking him with his fingers until Matt was gasping and whining. He couldn’t move his hips, but convulsively he tightened his abs and flung his arms out, gripping the bed when James pressed on his gland with his fingertips or brushed it with a knuckle. Then he would clench on James’s fingers, making himself even crazier with the feeling of having almost enough.

James slipped his fingers out and let go of Matt’s legs. Matt spread his thighs, trying to entice those fingers to come back. James gave him one slap on his ass. Matt jumped a little, pre-come welling out of him at the sting.

“Get on your stomach, Matty,” James said, lying down next to Matt as he rolled over.

On his stomach, Matt put his hands back where they were before, next to his head. “I thought you said you were done with foreplay,” he said to James as he felt James move over him again.

“That wasn’t foreplay, it was preparation.” Matt felt that voice in his chest and vibrating down his spine. James braced his weight over Matt, gripping his hands, his thighs forcing Matt’s legs farther apart. “You ready for me, baby?”

“Fuck. Yes.” Matt tilted his hips up into James, spreading his legs wider.

James sucked in a breath. Then he squeezed Matt’s hands—a warning not to move them—and brought one hand down to guide himself into Matt’s ass.

Matt felt the smooth, blunt head pushing into him and forced himself to relax. He loved this part, where his instinct was to clench, but he had to submit. James pushed until the head of his cock popped through the muscle. He froze a second, and brought his hand back to Matt’s. It felt like it was more for his own benefit, giving him something to grip.

Slowly he pushed in, pushing a groan out of Matt. “Fuck, ’s good,” Matt panted. That feeling of uncomfortable pleasure sending goose bumps up his spine as James started taking short, slow strokes, pushing father into Matt each time. Opening him up. It burned in the best kind of way, lighting up his nerves as James entered him.

“God, Matt, so tight.” Matt could hear the clench of James’s teeth.

Finally, Matt could feel James all the way in, his balls pressing against him, nestling above Matt’s own. He was stretched wide, feeling the burning ache, and that feeling

he could only get when he had a cock inside him. Touching some spot deep inside that begged for it. An impossible-to-reach itch. He arched up, bringing his back against James's chest again, turning his head to kiss him. James nipped his neck, right on the spine.

"James, go," Matt panted. James drew out slowly, pulling back so far Matt could feel that thick ridge just at his opening, then suddenly shoving back in, all the way. "Fuuuck." He moaned, tilting his hips to get more of James. "God, James, please…." And James did it again. That slow drag out, followed by the fast, deep hammering in.

Matt was sure he'd never been fucked like this. He knew he was babbling, telling James how good it was, how he'd never had it like this, begging for more. James's rhythm was picking up, unable to keep the kind of control he needed to fuck Matt so precisely. He was pounding Matt deeply, and Matt could feel himself opening for James each time he slammed his prick in. Stretching and rubbing and creating friction everywhere inside him. Lighting up nerves whenever James slid across his gland.

James levered himself higher over Matt, changing the angle. Hitting his prostate dead on.

"Oh fuck!" Matt was going to go hoarse at this rate. Each stroke in forced him down to the bed, rubbing his prick against the sheets. He was arching his back so much his hips had to be a foot off the bed every time James pulled back. He could feel his orgasm building, each thrust into his prostate sending shock waves through him, which ricocheted around and crashed into other shock waves, building in intensity.

Then James leaned down and gripped Matt's neck in his teeth, biting his spine, and Matt went nova. He could feel goose bumps on his back and the explosion in his balls and the convulsions in his asshole and prick. He was

spasming around James's cock, unable to clamp down all the way because James was inside him, forcing Matt to clench around him. The sheet against his cock was almost painful, and each time James hit his prostate it forced another yell out of Matt. He came in a hot, wet rush up his abdomen, tilting his hips up farther to get more of James, harder. Shooting more every time James shoved into him.

Before he was done, James was coming in him, waves of heat deep inside, making everything slipperier. James shoved in as far as he could with a cry, and then ground himself in little circles, breathing against Matt's neck. Falling into Matt's now-limp body.

Matt was boneless. He'd never really felt that before. He'd heard it, read it, but never been aware it was actually possible to misplace all one's bones at once like that. James was lying on top of him, resting his full weight on Matt, hot and heavy and pressing him into the mattress. Panting. Still inside him.

Matt felt owned. It was fan-fucking-tastic. He smiled to himself. And to James, who he didn't think was capable of noticing right now, but it was for him just the same. James nuzzled his shoulder blade slightly, scratching his whiskers across Matt's skin. "Mmmmmmm."

"Happy?" James's voice was still that rough rumble, and he could feel it through his back and chest.

"Fuck yes." That had to be the best sex he'd ever had. James nipped him, and then nuzzled more.

"Good, baby." Idly, Matt wondered if James was responding to his words or his thoughts. Too much work to ask.

They lay there in the sun, drowsing for a bit before James finally rolled off Matt, pulling out gently first. Matt hissed at the sensation. James pulled Matt's limp body into his, turning him on his side and spooning him, Matt's ass in

James's groin, and James's lips resting against the back of Matt's neck. Matt sighed happily. Even being in the wet spot couldn't ruin it. He wondered if he had teeth marks on the back of his neck. The idea sent an indefinable wave through him, part emotion and part sensation. "Mmmmm."

James traced lazy figures on Matt's chest with his fingertips. "You like it when I dominate you."

"That all right?" Matt held his breath.

"Yeah. Makes me hot. I like to be in control. You always like submitting when you get fucked?" Matt thought about the question, trying to figure out where James was going.

"Not any guy. Just some. Has to be the right guy."

"Mmmmm." James slowly tensed his muscles. "You like it with Steve?"

"Steve?" Matt was confused a second. "Steve from *high school*? He never fucked me."

James squeezed him tightly then kissed his neck, a long, wet, open-mouthed kiss. "Good," he growled.

Whoa. Growling. That was hot. Matt shifted his hips a little. James snorted. "God, don't start that. Don't think I can again for days."

Matt would have to see about that. "James, I'm not exactly a prude, but I don't let many guys fuck me."

"You said it'd only been a couple of months," James said softly. He sounded very alert.

"I saw Simon for a few months, but we broke it off when he found someone he was serious about. We were more like fuck-buddies. Before him it was more than a year."

James squeezed him again. "Like you, Matt," he murmured into Matt's neck. "'M serious about you."

Matt turned over in James's arms, throwing a leg over him and rubbing a hand on his back. "Serious about you too, James," he said against his lips, his heart lifting. Then Matt kissed him, long, slow, and deep.

JAMES planned to distract himself with sex. He wasn't going to think about what was happening in his head. If Matt stayed in bed with him, it'd work.

He just needed to ask Matt. He had his head on Matt's chest, running his fingers across the smooth skin and defined ridges of Matt's abs. He slid his leg up Matt's, feeling the hair lightly abrade the inside of his thigh. Matt suddenly reached down and grabbed James's leg, stilling him before James could begin nudging Matt's hip with his dick.

It was beginning to take an interest in things.

"James, how did you bring down that bird?"

"Bird?" James asked stupidly.

"The SAIA. You brought it down, right?"

"Oh, that." James thought about what to say. Reading brain waves was one thing, but fucking up enemy weaponry….

"You did it with your mind, didn't you?"

James cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Yeah."

"Sorry, babe. I just thought of it and wanted to know." James closed his eyes and sighed. Not having to talk about it was a bigger relief than he could have imagined two months ago.

Matt ran his hand up James's back, turning into him and scooting down. He brought his cheek to James's, rasping their stubbly skin together. James had always loved

that feeling. Girls had such smooth skin, which was nice in places, but he preferred the rougher touch of a man's.

Not that you couldn't find a hairy girl or two around if you looked, but it wasn't the same somehow.

In high school, he'd been middle of the road on gender. Except he'd never done anything about his attraction to guys, afraid his father would find out. And when he finally did go to bed with a guy in college he realized what he'd been missing. Girls held less than half his attention after that. Once he'd gotten the implant, he really wasn't much interested in women at all. That was gonna be a disappointment to his pop, not that the old bastard would be into a daughter-in-law anymore than he was his son.

As if Matt could read his mind—sometimes James wondered—he said, "Tell me about your dad. You know about my family, but I don't know jack about yours. Except your mom died when you were young and your grandmother lived with you."

James went for the truth. "My mom didn't die until I was nineteen. She left me and Pop and moved back to Idaho when I was three. She wasn't exactly a Blue sympathizer. Hated Oregon. Gramma just died a couple years ago."

Matt was silent, just running his hand up and down James's back. "I think she might have tried to see me a few times when I was a teenager, but Gramma Ayala was a woman who could hold a grudge. So I never saw her. Christmas cards and stuff, but not much else.

"Pop was just…." James shrugged. "He was conservative, but not enough to move to the Red."

"Too conservative to tell him you were gay."

"Yeah." He sighed. "I wasn't really gay in high school. More part of the 'queer spectrum'."

“What are you now?”

James smiled against Matt’s neck and gave his jaw a little nip. “Now I’m pretty much gay.” He could see Matt’s skin prickle after he nipped, so he did it again. Then he licked the prickles away. Except licking and blowing on them seemed to turn them into full-blown goose bumps.

“So, what was your *problem* with me?” Matt had sounded so calm before.

Carefully James probed Matt’s feelings. Still mostly open to him. Orgasms seemed to be useful for that. Not surprisingly, the high school thing still rankled. James knew Matt wasn’t with him for revenge, no matter what he’d said yesterday, but he could feel that Matt wasn’t so confident about his own desirability. At least when it came to James. Matt knew he was generally sex on a stick. James’s stick from now on, if he had any say about it.

James propped himself up on his elbow and looked down into Matt’s clear blue eyes. “My problem was I wanted you. I wanted other guys, occasionally, but more because they were available. I wanted you for you, not just because you were so hot—I thought you were, and still do—but because I liked you. It seemed like I was just starting to think maybe we could get together and I walked into that fucking machine shed and you were….”

James shrugged, uncomfortable saying any of this, but especially explaining his reaction to *that*. “I flipped. Facing just how much I wanted you freaked me out. I went into denial about it all. Didn’t want to be gay or bi or queer. It was a very mature, logical, unemotional reaction. The kind I’m famous for having.”

“For such an unemotional guy, you sure explain yourself well.” Matt was staring up at him, slipping one hand into his hair and carding it.

“The implant changed things. I accepted myself more, because I could sense how little it meant to people. And I can explain how I feel better because I can sense how other people feel, and how not being clear can fuck things up so much.

“For some reason, the implant made me even more attracted to men. And Christ in a bi-plane, I keep thinking we aren’t going to talk about it and I’m not going to think about it, and everything keeps coming back to that fucking implant.”

“Soooo,” Matt grinned at him, “let’s not talk anymore.” He pulled James down for a kiss. They kissed a while, James losing himself again like he had in the shower the night before. Then Matt pulled away, moving first to flick at his earlobe then move down his neck, scooting down the bed a little on his back, and then rolling over on top of James, forcing him down onto the bed.

Working his way down James’s body, Matt hit all the highlights, and most of the spots in between, with fingers and mouth. He was petting the inside of James’s thighs, breath hot and humid on his dick, and James was *so* ready to feel that tongue when Matt started shifting around.

And before James could really figure out what was happening, he had Matt’s long, thin, strangely graceful prick in his face. It sort of matched his nipples, pinkish in color. “Love your skin,” James rumbled, licking around the head.

“Mmmm?” Matt’s mouth was full, and it was distracting as hell.

“Your skin’s pale, flushes pink when you get hard, or turned on, or come.” James reached out his tongue and licked a drop of pre-come off the tip of Matt’s dick. Salty and bitter and a little bit sweet. Perfect.

Soon, James had Matt's prick grazing his throat and two fingers inside him, intentionally avoiding his prostate. Matt was squirming and whimpering, and had abandoned James's dick and was sucking his balls into his mouth, one at a time. Then he moved farther down, licking along the perineum. He worked his tongue back to the puckered skin in James's crack and James moaned and opened his legs wide, bending his knees.

Fuck, he loved being rimmed. Matt's tongue was wet and warm, and he sealed his lips around James's skin and sucked. James spread his legs wider, swallowing Matt down as far as he could, wanting more of Matt in him. Finally, Matt wiggled his tongue into James's hole a little. "Mmmmmm." He jerked a little, brushing the fingers inside Matt over his prostate. Matt moaned.

Matt was tongue-fucking him, and James reached down and started jerking himself. He used his fingers on Matt mercilessly, wanting to make him come in his mouth. "James," Matt said, panting. "Gonna come." James sucked harder, swallowing on him and pushing in with his fingers, rubbing and twisting and stroking.

Another long groan, and Matt was coming in his mouth. James swallowed it all down, sucking him hard and finger-fucking gently until he was done. Matt tasted like the ocean should, only cleaner. James was still jerking himself the whole time, but Matt had lost his concentration when he started coming.

James started pulling harder, intending to bring himself off, but Matt grabbed his hand. "Wait," he panted. Then he rolled onto his back and brought James over him, scooting him down a little so he could reach his asshole easier.

Matt grabbed James's ass and spread his cheeks, diving back in with his tongue. James propped himself up

on one hand, unable to stop himself from backing into Matt's tongue. He pulled on his dick harder and faster, and within a minute he was coming all over Matt's abs.

Matt kept tongue-fucking him until James moved himself off, collapsing onto the bed, panting and gasping. "Fuck that was good," he said once he had the wind.

Matt had come all over him, and looking at James, he swiped some up with his finger and stuck it in his mouth. James groaned. Matt grinned. Pearl knocked on the door and walked in.

—CHAPTER 17—

WHEN Pearl came back that evening with dinner, she knocked and waited for one of them to open up for her. Matt smiled. James blushed. It was cute as hell.

She'd gotten quite an eyeful when she brought them breakfast and had done her usual knock-and-walk-in routine. Fortunately, she'd also brought them sandwiches for later, so she hadn't had to come back before now.

James hadn't left all day, even though he could have. Matt couldn't leave, of course, since he was supposed to be James's sick wife.

They'd found ways to pass the time. They'd just gotten out of the shower when Pearl showed up with food. It was beef stew, salad, and rolls. Matt was nearly ecstatic.

It turned out to be their last meal at the convent.

It was one of Matt's better last meals. He might have enjoyed it less if he'd known.

After they ate, they were lying on the bed. James was half-dressed, in a clean pair of camos. Matt was nude, lying on his stomach, head pillowed on his good arm, the other hand inspecting James's naked feet. He'd never had any idea feet were so sexy. James's toes were… well, they were beautiful. He was stroking them with his fingertips, underneath where the skin was soft and especially sensitive. Thinking about running his tongue around them,

in between them, flicking at that little webbing. James *had* just taken a shower. Matt sniffed experimentally.

For God's sake, he'd licked the guy's asshole; he could suck his toes. He'd just opened his mouth and leaned in when James ran a finger down his spine. Matt shut his mouth with a snap, holding himself at quivering attention, waiting for more of that touch.

James did it again. Then again, this time running his finger down all the way to Matt's tailbone, between his cheeks. Then he traced soft, almost nonexistent patterns on the sensitive skin there with a finger. Matt's whole body slowly tensed, ratcheting up into shivering awareness. He could feel the goose bumps sweep across his lower back.

"Mmmmm," James rumbled. "Love it when you do that."

"What?" Matt asked with a little gasp. Was he doing something?

"Get goose bumps. Love your skin. Your face and hands and arms are kinda tan, but the rest of you is so pale. You're tough and kinda… sinewy, but your skin is almost delicate. And you flush pink for me when I touch you."

"I'm sinewy and *delicate*?" Matt was laughing a little. And not sure he liked the description.

"Shut up," James said roughly, and pressed down hard on the skin just above his hole with his thumb.

"Ngh." Matt's head shot up, supporting his upper body on his arms. He was afraid a whimper might have escaped him. All the muscles in his lower body tensed up involuntarily, tilting his ass up to James's hand. He spread his legs slightly.

Then he threw in a little hip swivel, just for good measure. James laughed softly, and lifted his thumb off him.

After a second, Matt collapsed back on the bed, disappointed.

But then James's feet disappeared, and Matt could feel his warm weight coming down over his back. James didn't have his shirt on, and Matt could feel the hair rubbing his back, and imagined he could feel James's nipples getting hard and rubbing against him also.

James's lips were on the nape of Matt's neck. He could feel the hard ridge of James's erection settling against his ass, his hips rocking gently. "Your back is so sensitive," he said into Matt's skin. Matt shivered at the warm, moist heat. "It's like one giant erogenous zone."

Matt felt himself flushing a little, but also shivered in anticipation. "Always been like that. Don't know why. Looking at backs turns me on too. You have a sexy back." He stretched his neck, turning his head, and gave James a kiss.

"I have a sexy back?"

"Yeah. Broad shoulders, muscle definition, and it all narrows down and dips into your lower back. You have back dimples right above your ass. 'S hot."

"Mmmm, you're hot," James murmured, nibbling on his neck again.

"Fuck," Matt moaned. "Do me." He wiggled his ass up into James for emphasis.

James's reaction was not what Matt expected. He laughed.

"Why're you laughing?" Matt didn't know whether to be embarrassed, pissed, or amused.

"You make me laugh. You think you give up control in sex, but you don't, not totally."

"I can't ask for it if I want you in control?"

“Yeah, you can ask. Or demand. ’S fine.” James nibbled at his neck more.

Matt ignored the shivering and prickle it caused, and asked for clarification. “So, how don’t I give up control?” He could feel James shrug.

“Don’t know, not really. Just get that feeling.” He was only half listening. Matt shoved a shoulder blade into him, trying to get his attention. James stopped.

“You mean, you pick it up from my mind?”

“Yeah, I guess. Like, you’d like to really let go, but you can’t yet or something. Not a big deal, Matt. You have to go with what turns you on. You’ll do it eventually with me, if you want it.”

Matt could feel James breathing on the back of his neck, waiting. He dropped his head down and rubbed his forehead against his fist. He didn’t focus on the implied continuation of the relationship. He tried not to focus on whether he was “letting go.”

“Why does that bother you?” James asked when Matt remained silent, just rubbing his forehead.

“Don’t know. In a way, it doesn’t. I mean, wanting that —to give up control and have someone else *make* me react —is kinda weird in the first place, right? So why should it bug me that I’m not as into it as I thought I was?”

“’S not weird, Matt. Just the way you’re wired. We have hot sex, and I think we’re both into it, so does it matter how we get there?”

“Why am I wired that way?”

“How would I know?” James was starting to sound a little bit irritated, but Matt was fixated on it now. “I can’t tell you where you got the desire to give up control. I think you’re way too focused on why. Maybe it’s just like being gay, maybe there’s a submission gene.”

Matt snorted out a laugh through his nose. “Like one of my parents gave it to me? Jesus, my money’s on my dad. I bet in the bedroom—Gah! What am I saying?!”

James laughed at Matt’s expression of revulsion and horror. “I thought it was kinda funny.”

“Yeah, you won’t the next time you see my dad.” Matt was annoyed with him for laughing. James swallowed uncomfortably, his amusement melting away.

Matt wasn’t ready to give up on the control discussion. “I wasn’t like, abused or anything. The only person in my life who ever really made me feel bad for my sexual preferences was you.”

Matt realized his mistake immediately. James stiffened and started to push off. “James, sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

James froze. “Like what? I can’t be the only guy in Weimer who gave you shit for being gay. It’s got to be one of the last pockets of homophobia left in Oregon.” He sounded annoyed, but not truly pissed.

Matt was more concerned about hurting James than whether he was mad. “You weren’t the only guy. It was just worse with you.” He could sense James’s confusion. “I don’t remember anyone else ever calling me a fag. I’m not saying no one did,” he added quickly. “It’s just that when you did it made me feel awful.” Matt’s turn to shrug. “You were the only guy who was my friend first.” The only guy he’d had a major crush on who turned on him.

“You had a thing for me?” James, of course, picked up on what Matt didn’t actually say.

He sighed. “Yeah,” Matt admitted quietly.

“You know I had a thing for you, right?”

“Um, yeah. Got that.”

This all seemed to settle things for James. He propped himself on his elbows over Matt again, waiting.

“What?” Matt finally broke down and asked.

“So, the control issue….”

“Good lord, what kind of guy are you? You want to *talk* while I’m offering you my ass?”

James laughed. When he sobered a little, he told a disgruntled Matt, “Yeah. You won’t have a good time if you’re worrying about how much control you’re giving me and whether that’s okay, and I won’t be able to *not* know you’re not having a good time.”

Matt rolled out from under him. Suddenly he was pissed. “Great. Now I’m fucking up the sex for you too.” He stalked over to his pack and started to dress.

“’S not your fault, Matt.” James was quiet, but Matt could hear him. “I *want* you to have a good time. I don’t care if you’re submissive or whatever. Doesn’t make me see you any differently.”

Matt made the effort to shut his mind down completely. It was too embarrassing. And made him vulnerable. Because he knew two things were worrying him, and he didn’t want James to know about either. First, how did James see him if Matt’s being submissive didn’t change anything? And second, did Matt’s hesitation to give up complete control mean he didn’t truly trust James?

He knew it was fucked up. If James saw him as weak and—shudder—slightly effeminate because he wanted to be dominated in bed, did that mean James saw him out of bed that way? And if Matt was worried about being seen as weak, why the hell did it bug him that he was afraid he wasn’t acting submissive (i.e., weak) enough?

It was all about trust. He didn’t know who he didn’t trust enough, James or himself.

“James. I just need to think.” He looked back at the bed. James was watching him closely. His expression was that blank, emotionless one he used to cut himself off from everyone. Matt wanted the guy who showed him how he felt back. Jesus, he’d just fucked everything up, hadn’t he?

He walked back to the bed and ran a finger along James’s jaw. “Sorry,” he whispered. He leaned down and kissed James’s cheek. When Matt stood up, he saw something in James’s eyes. Some kind of understanding. Of what, he didn’t know. James gave him a curt nod.

“’S’okay.” When Matt turned away to get his razor, James surprised him by giving him a pat on the ass. He looked back over his shoulder. James quirked a lip at him.

Maybe it really was okay. Matt went in to shave and think about it.

PEARL came back at 2200. An hour before they were supposed to leave for check-in. She came not only with supplies to work on Matt’s shoulder, but with miscellaneous tech, a DEW pistol for James and, most ominously, Carmella.

“I need to check how far along you are. I’m going to put a dermaweb on your shoulder and seal it. It looks like you need to leave tonight.” Pearl started talking in a low voice before Carmella had cleared the door.

“What happened?” James wanted to know, instantly alert.

“Mother Superior told us that we’re going to have to billet a government militia strike-team. The advance detail should be here tonight to sweep the convent. The rest should arrive sometime tomorrow. Apparently they’re looking for RIA fugitives.”

“Oh. I suppose that would be us.” Matt had half been expecting this. Really, they’d had more time here than he’d hoped.

James packed quickly for them while Pearl fixed Matt up for hard travel. He’d have to have the dressing opened up once he was out of Idaho, but for the time being his shoulder was all but bomb-proof.

“Can you make me a ballistics suit out of that?”

Carmella hooted, but Pearl seemed to find his humor out of place.

“C’mon, Pearl!” Carmella cried, slapping Pearl on the back so hard Matt had to catch her shoulder to keep her from pitching over the side of the bed. “If you can’t find humor in life-or-death situations, when can you find it?”

James was done long before Pearl was, and Matt thought he actually looked… antsy. Probably tired of shifting his weight by the door, he slipped out to see what was going on.

Pearl started readying injections. “I’m giving you an extra dose of time-release NSAIDs. Then James should again tomorrow evening when you head out. No more nano-menders, though.” She also gave him anti-bionanos, and a nutritive energy boost.

Matt sighed when it was all over. By then he could feel the blood pumping the adrenaline through his veins. He was in a state of hyperawareness. Not the kind he got in the middle of a fight, but the expectant, waiting kind.

This was when he felt the most like a secret agent, half-assed or not. When he was leaving unexpectedly, in the middle (fine—beginning, whatever) of the night, staying one step ahead of enemies, trying to reach that goal line where friends waited to grab him as he raced by, hell for leather.

It made him itchy inside. Made his body hum, excitement soaking into his tissue. Restless, ready to move. “Let’s go.” He got up off the bed before Pearl could finish looking over her handiwork. “It’s fine, Pearl, thank you.” Some impulse made him kiss her on the cheek. He turned to Carmella.

“Don’t touch me.” She was clearly serious about it.

Hands up in front of him, Matt denied he’d even been thinking about it. As they walked out the door, he felt like whooping with his freedom. Finally out of that fucking room—although the fucking had been nice—and headed home.

The trip to the kitchens was sedate as hell. James seemed to vibrate with energy, and Matt thought it was almost killing him to fake the pleasant nighttime stroll. Matt kept one hand wrapped around his forearm to keep him steady. And wondered if it worked.

Before they got there, they had a clear view of the entry courtyard, and some decrepit old nun pulling the faux-aged wood door back, wide open. Three militia members rode in on personal skimmers. Matt felt more than saw James’s attention strung taut. No one paused in their sedate walk.

“Ha!” Carmella exclaimed quietly. “Could go try and distract those boys a bit, but Sister Mary Dementia is the best stall we could hope for.”

“Who’s Sister Mary Dementia?”

“The crazy old bat who answers the door,” James answered him. Matt looked at him in surprise. “Met her earlier.” James rolled his eyes.

Matt was sure there was a story there. He made a mental note to ask about it later.

Carmella led them in to the kitchen, and then into a huge pantry area, which had moveable shelves for food storage. The last shelf was immobile, flush against the wall, until Carmella tripped a lock up high on the unit, hidden above the top. It swung open, revealing a bolt-hole.

Benigna was waiting inside. Her habit and wimple were missing, replaced by all-weathers and boots. “Hi!” She smiled brightly at Matt and James.

Matt just barely kept himself from groaning. Shit. He’d forgotten all about her. Suddenly he wasn’t anticipating the trip so much.

“Macho, high-handed prick,” Matt muttered as James slipped out of the bolt-hole and left him in there.

“Why’s he going?” Benigna whispered. Loudly.

Left him in there *with Benigna*. Fuck, who cared about their physical safety? His mental health was at stake here. “Benigna, what did I say—”

“Call me Beni. I’m Beni, now,” she insisted for the nth time that night.

“Whispers *carry*!” Matt whispered vehemently.

“Then why are you whispering?” she asked him in a very low voice. She almost had the subvocalizing figured out.

He was gonna fucking kill her. “Just shut up,” he muttered. She leaned sulkily against the wall. But she shut up.

Fucking James had left. To protect them. Did he think Matt was incapable of protecting himself? If the guys searching the kitchen with chip-radiation sensors *did* find them hiding behind this wall, he’d kick ass if he had to. His

martial arts instructor was a fucking ninja. Or whatever the Chinese equivalent was.

Benigna might be a liability, granted. Maybe she could just talk them into a stupor. She'd nearly done it to them before they'd convinced her to shut the hell up.

Matt turned his mind back to James. James leaving them because it was the best way to protect them. Okay, he may be *right*, but that was beside the point. Yes, the militia was hoping to pick up the trace radiation signal from James's Red chip. Yes, James couldn't—they both thought—affect the radiation signature with his mind. But James had argued that he might be able to affect how their sensors functioned. And if he couldn't, he could jump the soldiers first if he wasn't trapped behind this wall.

"Fucking macho, high-handed prick."

"I think he's being manly and protective."

"That's what *I'm* saying." Matt thought over the "protective" comment. "Protective of what?" Him?

"The fairer sex. The damsel in distress."

It took Matt a second to realize she probably didn't think he was the damsel. Or the fairer sex. "You?"

"Well, he's not being protective of you." Benigna stuck out a pouty lip.

"If he's being protective of you, then what am I doing here?"

She looked at him like he was simple-minded. "You're protecting me if they find me. You're the last line of defense. My God, do I have to tell you how to fight them too?"

Her voice was getting louder as she got her rant on. As Matt stared at her, she took a deep breath, as if in preparation to go on at length. He slapped a hand over her

mouth. “I think they’re searching the shelves now.” He looked out the peephole. She’d never know they’d moved into the dining hall; she couldn’t see anything. Matt removed his hand, blocking the peephole to keep her from checking.

Jesus, James was right. She did have a twisted little mind. Someone had read her one too many fairy tales.

He heard one of their sensors beeping, suddenly. “Sarge, I think I—” The shout was cut off with the smack of something hitting flesh. Shit, he was so outta here. Matt hit the latch that opened the bolt-hole and stepped out.

“What?” shrieked Benigna. He rolled his eyes. A shriek wasn’t helping anything. He glared at her. It had no visible effect.

“Stay here, and be quiet. I’ll be back,” he ordered in his best imitation of Lance’s command voice. Then he took a step outside the door. She stayed put, hands on hips, but quiet.

Huh. It worked. Matt left his pack and grabbed his pistol, shutting Benigna inside.

JAMES was getting his ass kicked. This guy must have some serious martial arts training. He fought like he’d been professional MMA. Extensive SF hand-to-hand training?

The first guy had gone down without a sound, but this guy’s chip sensor had warned him. And there was a third person, hiding out. Why they didn’t join the fight was beyond him. Probably because he was having his ass handed to him.

He’d been doing all right, holding his own, but then he’d heard Benigna shriek, and his distraction had cost him. He could feel his left eye swelling shut, and he was

mostly focused on the fight, but an alarmingly large part of his mind was worried about what might be happening with Matt and the nun.

In spite of being on the short side of average, James had a few centimeters and a dozen kilos or so on this guy. His opponent was whip thin, flexible as hell, and had reflexes that didn't quite seem within the range of human. James wracked his brain, but nope, he was still sure genetic engineering of humans was illegal in Red states.

He took three shots in quick succession, two to the face and a kick in the kidneys, and it was all over for him. Except the guy took a head shot. From a laser DEW, judging by the way his head sorta just… cauterized his brain.

Blinking and swaying on his feet, James looked over toward where the laser must have come from. Matt stood up from beside an old gas cooktop and walked over to James, a little unsteady.

"Thought that was gonna end a little differently," James slurred slightly, leaning on Matt. Heavily.

"Me too." Matt rested his forehead against James's and looked in his eyes. "Glad you aren't dead." Matt tilted just a little to kiss him.

God he felt good, warm lips careful with James's swollen one. He could feel a slight tremble in Matt's lips, in his whole body. James kissed him back, slipping his arms around Matt's waist. Matt snuggled into James a little, like he needed some comfort.

Why would Matt need comfort? From killing that guy? He must have killed in battle before. But maybe not so close up. And he had to have taken care of the third person.

Wait, what *had* happened with the third guy? James leaned back a little, trying to bring his brain back on line to

ask Matt. But his mind was already niggling at him—someone else was in the room, watching them.

That someone gasped, and James had Matt behind him in a split second, pistol in hand. He had to close one eye to focus, admittedly, but he was protecting Matt just like Matt had him.

It was Benigna. “You… you *kissed* him!” She pointed a shaking finger at them, mouth open in affronted horror.

“Does she practice this shit in a mirror?” Matt muttered behind him. “Come off it, Benigna. You already knew we were fags.”

Her mouth snapped shut, her hands flew to her hips, and her eyes blazed. “*I’m* the damsel! Me! I’m the damsel, dammit! Not you! Or you! And I told you enough times already—call me *Beni*!”

Matt’s view was partially blocked by James, and James was dazed and distracted by Benig—Beni. That’s how the third soldier was able to grab her so easily and press that DEW against her head.

“*Now* she’s the damsel,” Matt said quietly in his ear.

—CHAPTER 18—

THIS was when Carmella walked in, ready to pitch a fit over how long the soldiers had been in her kitchen.

The third soldier didn't seem particularly experienced. She whipped her head around when Carmella walked in, giving Beni a chance to turn her head and bite the hand that held the pistol. Which led to lots of shrieking—Beni's and the soldier's.

"Th'fuck?" Carmella barked. "Shut the hell up, Maligna!"

James was already on the move toward the woman holding Beni hostage (well, that was arguable at this point), and had her down and out cold in seconds. "You got cuffs?" he asked Matt. He had a knee in the woman's back and her arms twisted up behind her.

Matt handed over the flexies. James cuffed her and then opened a walk-in cooling unit and dragged out the first soldier he'd taken down, also flexi-cuffed and out cold (ha!).

Carmella flipped over the woman James had taken down. James snorted. "It's Kandy Melore. My 'caseworker' in Boise."

"Oh. Then that means…." *Shit*.

"No," James said quickly. "They didn't know we were here. She was as surprised as I was. I could feel it the

whole time. It was dumb luck."

"Jesus fucking Christ," Carmella muttered.

Beni gasped in shock. Then she looked thoughtful. "Yeah," she said wonderingly. "Jesus *fucking* Christ!" She started jumping up and down and clapping her hands.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Matt muttered, staring at her.

Carmella just rolled her eyes. "Can it, Maligna," she barked. The jumping and clapping stopped immediately.

"What the hell was she doing out of her office? Is she militia?"

James thought about it a minute. Then he bent down and removed her vest, searching Kandy for ID. "Nope," he answered when he came up with her card. "Says here she's RIA admin. I got the impression she forced her way in on this. I bet they sent her here because they never thought we'd be here. That would explain the gleeful feeling she was projecting."

"I thought you said she was surprised."

"Yeah. Surprised, shocked, terrified, and gleeful. Think that about covers it."

Everyone was silent for a few seconds. Until James pointed out they needed to get moving.

"You're going to have to cuff me, too, and leave me here," Carmella pointed out. "Otherwise they'll think I'm a collaborator. Pearl's on her way, I won't be stuck long. It'll give her a kick to 'rescue' me."

Clearly, it was necessary. But James looked like he'd rather eat a laser pistol. Matt shrugged. "I'll do it. I can just pretend you're Anais." Carmella chuckled.

"Maybe since I'm a weak old nun, you could cuff me to a chair. No, not that one, the one with the cushion," she snapped when Matt grabbed a counter stool. "James, take

the NSAIDs in the medi-kit before you can't see out of that eye. Not so tight!" she complained to Matt as he brought her arms around behind the chair.

Yep, just like Anais. He cuffed her to the chair while James went and grabbed their packs. Beni obviously hadn't packed for herself, judging by how light her pack looked.

"All right, get going. I'll update Pearl. She's going to have to pretend you tricked her, somehow. I don't think that woman's down for long, so get a move on." Matt looked back at Carmella, and got a goodbye wink from her. He smiled. He had to admit he liked her quite a bit.

So, that left James, Matt, and Beni crouched by the side gate when they heard Pearl shriek. James had the distracted gate guard out cold in seconds, and they were outta there.

James had to help Beni with the NV lenses. Matt could see the sense in giving her some, too, and was thankful Pearl and Carmella thought to include some. He was just too disgusted with her earlier histrionics to care if she had them in.

She was quiet, though. At least, she didn't speak. She still sounded like a bull moose coming through the brush. Apparently they didn't give woodcraft badges out in the convent.

When they got to the gas station, Matt could tell something was off. James scoped it out for a minute too long from the brushy ditch. Then suddenly he stood up, stuck two fingers in his mouth, and whistled.

Th'fuck?

From the small copse of trees a little west of the station, a large shadow detached itself and started trotting toward them.

It was Miz.

It was appalling how happy Matt was to see her. And not just so she could carry their stuff. James was actually hugging her around her neck while she bobbed her head enthusiastically. James got hit a couple of times, but he didn't seem to mind.

He turned to Matt and gave a huge smile, one hand on her withers. James reached out and pulled Matt to him, and they stood there in a little circle. It felt disconcertingly like… a family reunion. Matt turned away from James's bright smile and looked at Miz in something akin to horror. Was she their… child?

Miz nipped him. Hard. While snorting horse mucus all over him. Damn thing couldn't even blow her own damn nose. Would she ever grow up?

James squeezed him, and even though he was covered in horse mucus and thought the situation was ridiculously—surreal?—he squeezed back. Because Matt didn't think many things had the power to make James this happy right now. Just happy, no other crap messing it up. Matt would do a lot to give him more of that.

"What in the hell is that?" Beni's voice was thin and shaky.

Oh, Jesus.

"'S'a horse," James said, mystified.

"But what's it *doing* here?"

"She's meeting us." Subtle emphasis on "she."

Beni was a city girl, it appeared. She knew nothing about horses. "You've lived in a convent in the middle of nowhere for almost ten years. How can you know nothing about living in the country?" Matt couldn't believe her.

"I didn't go *outside*. Not unless someone made me."

"What the hell did you do?"

Beni blushed, or at least her face got darker. It was hard to tell with the NV lenses what actual color she was. She mumbled something.

“What?”

Hands on hips. “I said, ‘I tried to get around the netminder and download erotica.’ And I snooped around, I guess.”

Even Miz was staring at her. She made a pretty strange nun.

“Guess we’d better call in,” James said after a short silence. Beni flounced to the wall of the abandoned gas station and leaned against it, doing her best “disaffected youth.”

They were a bit late on call-in; it was almost 0000. Lance answered on the first ring. “About fucking time,” he grumbled.

“Yeah, we had to bug out unexpectedly. We’re heading for the dam tonight.”

“I don’t think I can up the rendezvous.”

“Don’t; we can’t promise we’ll make it any earlier.” Matt gave him a rundown on the situation. Once Lance was done being his boss, he became Grampa, and started telling him to be careful and yadda, yadda. Matt passed off the handset to James with relief.

It was short-lived. Lance was updating James on his military status. They were talking about the conditions of discharge, Matt finally figured out.

“Yeah, I can handle the medical. I can make myself available.”

Available for *what*? “James, tell me.” James ignored him. He grabbed the phone from him. James stood there a

second, gaping at his empty hand, then tried to grab it back, but Matt was prepared for that.

“—they’ll expect you to be available to be poked at by their R&D guys for God knows how long,” Lance was saying.

“Tell them no deal.” There was no fucking way Matt was putting up with that.

Lance gave a long sigh. “It’s James’s show, Matt.” He didn’t sound enthusiastic about it, either.

“No. Fucking. Way.” He was not putting James through this. “Tell them we’ll run for it. It won’t be easy to find an empath who can sense an ambush a mile off. Or a guy who has top-secret SAIA-sensing technology.”

“They have guys like James to track him, you know. And *what* top-secret tech?”

“Later,” Matt said shortly. “They may have guys like James, but those guys haven’t had their implants ‘developed’ the same way. He can do shit they can’t imagine. And they never will if they don’t cut a decent deal.”

There was a long silence. Matt looked at James. The look on his face sent a slicing pain through Matt’s chest. He looked destroyed and vulnerable, but as if he’d be okay with that if Matt meant what he was saying. Matt wanted to drop the phone and grab him. Hold him tight, rub his face in his hair—

“They’ll never go for not being able to study him, Matt.” And didn’t that just sum it all up right there? James wasn’t a soldier anymore; he was a fucking science project. He may not have had any choices about the implant as a soldier, but he had some rights. Matt wouldn’t stand for his humanity being secondary to his implant and what it could do.

“You’ll never see your family again, Matt.” Grampa said, his voice a little unsteady. “You’d go with him?”

“I’ll go with him.” Matt was staring into James’s eyes. “If he wants me to.”

James’s face was slack with shock, but his eyes glistened. James carefully planted a hand above his head on the rough brick wall. He leaned into it, and reached out for Matt with his other hand, gripping Matt’s neck and bringing his head in so James could rest his forehead against it. Like he needed Matt. James sighed and closed his eyes, and Matt could almost see the tension leaking out of him. Matt slid his free hand around James’s waist, gripping fabric and holding on.

“So, what are you suggesting?” Lance finally asked in the silence.

“They can study him.” James’s eyes flew open and stared into his. All Matt read was trust. He kept his mind as open as he could, only protecting that last little kernel of emotion he couldn’t bear exposing yet.

He took a deep breath. “They can study him for two weeks a year, max. And he gets to take a guest with him. Eight-hour days.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Lance sounded a little more solid, now. “I might be able to swing this, if James stays with QESA the rest of the year. Anais will probably have to cough up periodic reports.” They both knew that was no issue. Anais didn’t do shit she didn’t want to, and she’d blithely bullshit her way through it and happily admit to it later. Major General Selkirk would back up whatever she chose to do.

“’K, Grampa. We’ll check in tomorrow night and see where you’re at.”

“No, Matt, no check-ins. Just get to the river and we’ll talk when you two get home.”

When Matt hung up, James was vibrating with suppressed emotion. Matt wished he was an empath so he could figure out what all was going on in James. He’d have to find out the old-fashioned way.

He slipped his other hand around James and rubbed his back in little circles. “What?” he asked, keeping his voice low. James just shook his head, his forehead still pressed to Matt’s.

Matt let him have his privacy, and pressed on James’s back with his palms, instead, bringing him in. He gave James a full-body hug. Not sexual, but meant to bring warmth and comfort everywhere. “’S’okay, babe. We’ll work it out. I’m not letting you do this alone.”

It wasn’t that James wanted to do this alone. He just didn’t want to have to drag Matt into it. James was, to put it mildly, a bad relationship bet. He had a fucking mutant alien brain in his head, he was going to be a bug under a microscope for the rest of his life, and until they were out of Idaho, Matt was in grave danger because of him. If the RIA caught them, he’d end up as their lab rat, but Matt would be executed.

And in spite of holding him in his arms, Matt was slowly closing him out of his emotions, again. Even a minute ago, when he’d opened up, James could feel a small part he’d walled off. He knew he had to eventually let Matt go for his own safety, but somehow he couldn’t bear the thought of Matt thinking that way.

He was a pathetic, emotional mess. Consciously, James concen-trated on pulling himself back together. It was

going to be a slow process. Sheepishly, he nuzzled into Matt's neck a little further. May as well take the comfort while he could.

But everything snapped back into place in an instant when he realized what was coming their way. He stood up so fast Matt fell against the wall.

"James?"

Without really thinking about it, he stalked over to Beni—strangely silent this whole time—while calling Miz to him. Beni had taken off her pack, the idiot. He picked it up and roughly started pushing her arms into it.

"What are you—?" she began. Shriekily, of course.

James cut her off in his command voice. "You're getting on Miz and she's riding out of here with you. We'll rendezvous on the other side of Cambridge; she'll know where." James tried to push a little bit of a "trust me" command with his words. He couldn't tell if it took. Beni was too freaked out by getting on a horse.

"I've never been on a horse!"

"Be quiet and get on. Miz won't let you fall off. Just hang on tight to her mane." He relayed instructions to Miz mentally. Miz snorted in disgust but grudgingly agreed.

Matt, silently checking his own pack, then standing behind James to double check his, interrupted Beni's next spate of protests. "All the best damsels are escaping on the horse while the knights cover their retreat, Beni. Very chic."

Beni's mouth closed with a snap. She eyed Matt suspiciously. Along with her suspicion, James felt a healthy dose of wanting to believe Matt's bullshit. James didn't give her time to think it over. He threw her on Miz.

Predictably, she shrieked. She clutched Miz's mane reflexively. The second Miz felt she was secure—as secure

as she was going to get—Miz started off.

More shrieking ensued. Shit, they may as well just send up a flare for the recon he could feel coming their way. In desperation, James sent out a mental gag order.

Beni's shriek cut off in mid-arc.

Cool. Nice of his alien brain to come through on that. Too bad he couldn't really rely on it to come through regularly.

Around the street side of the building, James could sense less from the approaching team. Of course they were coming from the convent. He and Matt left the shadows and sprinted across the road, throwing themselves into the ditch on the other side.

Matt silently followed him as James crawled on his belly toward Cambridge in the ditch. It was too obvious an escape route. They'd have to get out of it ASAP. The recon team was practically breathing down their necks.

One hundred forty meters down, there was a culvert under the road. It was mostly dry, just starting to run again after irrigation season ended and the rain started higher up. He could feel Matt's annoyed resignation as they crawled through the mud, under the road. It was a big culvert, one of the old mix-crete jobs, wide enough that they could have crawled side by side if they hadn't been in this situation. Course, they probably wouldn't crawl through a culvert in their leisure time.

It was as James neared the other end that he felt someone out there. Close enough that their presence ricocheted into the culvert. He signed a halt to Matt. Silently, Matt rolled over on his back and covered their rear. He had out the rifle they'd taken from the mountie.

No movement. For ten minutes James could sense no directional change in the pattern of the brain waves. They

ricocheted around a bit, making it hard for him to pinpoint, but the ricochet pattern didn't seem to differ much. One person, he was almost sure.

Suddenly he felt Matt's head drop behind him. Without thinking, he dropped facedown into the mud. Another person was at that end of the culvert, now. A different presence, but a familiar one. No ricochet. Wariness and hyper-attention. Kandy Melore was looking in directly, probably dropped down from the road next to the entrance. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the familiar glow of a wand bounce around the culvert. He stopped breathing.

The bottom of the culvert was a foot deep in mud, and debris and garbage dotted it. Even with a light shining directly on them, their night-camo should fade into the background. Shit, he hoped he had enough mud in his hair and on his neck. He hoped Matt had managed to coat his face.

The faint murmur of an earpiece—turned up too loud—and then James could clearly hear Kandy's response. "Looks clear. I'll have Johnson go in, but this doesn't look like a likely hiding spot."

She hadn't stayed unconscious long. Or someone brought her around. And she was clearly an idiot when it came to the best hiding spots. James cracked an inappropriate smile as he felt Matt's wave of amusement breaking over him.

Suddenly the light shifted. James chanced a peek to his side. It was off them. Pointed to the floor back at the entrance?

"Johnson!" he heard her shout. Jesus, who taught her covert ops?

Probably no one, come to think of it.

“Ma’am?” came the reply, quieter, from whoever was on his side of the culvert. The guy he’d first sensed.

“You go in and search.”

James tried to communicate a simple plan to Matt. Shoot Melore when James nudged him with his foot. He felt a very subtle nudge on his toe. “Got it,” he clearly heard in his mind.

Okay, now *that* was covert ops communication. Better than a Brain-link, which required a mic to send. He decided to worry later about how he could “talk” to Matt this way all of a sudden. It seemed like his abilities were heightened during stressful situations.

Amazingly, once Johnson was in place at the other end of the culvert, Melore put the light out completely. “Gotta save the NV,” she said conversationally down the culvert to Johnson, who was just crawling in.

James could feel Johnson’s disgust. “Ma’am.” He wasn’t happy about taking orders from an ignorant civilian.

“Moving on in search pattern,” Melore told her headset.

Th’fuck? She was a complete yahoo.

“Ma’am,” Johnson acknowledged. He thought he’d be better off without her.

James could feel the tension slowly leach out of Matt, leaving only the hyperawareness. James was still unnaturally still, and it was only as Johnson was about to step on his hand that James was up, covering his mouth and restraining him in a split second. Not an idiot, just not at the same level of training. Probably regular militia. He let James subdue him once his rifle was gone. He lay in the mud, his heart rabbiting but otherwise still.

“You’re regular RIA militia?” The guy didn’t answer, but James could almost hear the affirmation echoing in his

brain. He nodded at Matt. Matt was up and crouched against a wall, covering both entrances.

“You on, babe?” Johnson started with shock at the endearment. Matt hadn’t done it for shock value, James didn’t think. It worked, though.

James probably couldn’t ask the questions, read the waves, and keep his mind on alert for hostiles at the same time. “You ask the questions. I’ll just keep open. Babe.” He looked up with a little smirk, in time to see Matt’s face darken slightly. *Now* he realized what he’d said.

Matt turned to Johnson. “You know who I am?” After thinking it over, Johnson gave a slight nod. Matt turned his face up to James. “If you uncover his mouth, will he call out?”

“I’ll break your neck if I hear a peep.” James’s tone was conversational. “And I imagine you know I can do much worse to your mind.” He was counting on Kandy Melore’s exaggerations after their encounter. He read no intent from the guy to raise an alarm as he cautiously took his hand away.

“Tell me who you think I am,” Matt ordered.

“QESA agent.” The guy’s voice was a little hoarse.

“Know my name?”

“Matthew Barrow.”

“Fuck. Guess I’ll throw that ID out. Wasn’t doing me any good here, anyway. Who’s he?” Matt indicated James with a head nod.

“First Lieutenant James Ayala, Psi-force, SOUF. Aka James Wahlberg from Caldwell. They got that ID from the convent’s records,” Johnson offered.

“Guess we’ll throw yours out too. You’re gonna have to keep the real one, though.” Matt turned back to the militia

soldier. “You don’t know me by any other names?”

Johnson shook his head. James breathed a sigh of relief, and took a second to sweep more intently for any approach he could pick up from outside. Nothing, still.

“Matt, they’re gonna expect him to report back any second. We should move.”

“You willing to radio in and okay this culvert?” It was a delicate question. He could radio in, but use a code term indicating they were here.

“I’ll know if you’re lying,” James pointed out. “Or if you tip them off.”

Johnson swallowed. He had to know they wouldn’t just leave him here. He was either going with them, or he was going to be neutralized, probably permanently. He turned his head slowly to look at James. “Will you trust me if I say I’ll radio in, then we move to a more secure location?”

Suddenly, James realized what had changed about the guy when he positively identified them. He wanted something. Badly. Badly enough to cooperate and play traitor. Should he trust a guy like that? He could tell Johnson didn’t intend to expose them, but what if he didn’t get what he wanted?

James looked up at Matt. Matt was waiting for his call. Suddenly, the amount of trust Matt put in him was a lump in his throat. “Yeah, we can try that. We’re cuffing you, and you’re wearing a gag after you call in. Do you have a place in mind?”

“Three hundred meters southeast of here is a small pond with drainage into this ditch. Was already searched, but I’ll say I saw something in the poplars and I’m going back to inspect. They’ll think I’m just slacking off, but the LT won’t do shit about it as long as I don’t take more than fifteen minutes or so.”

They made their way back to the south end of the culvert, and Johnson checked in on his headset, clearing the culvert and feeding the line about the poplars.

“You need help with the search?” The lieutenant sounded like he was faking officious. Melore must be close by.

“No, probably just an animal. I’ll be alert.”

—CHAPTER 19—

JAMES took out Johnson's gag but kept him cuffed when they got to the tree-screened pond. He nodded to Matt to keep the questions up.

"What's your name, rank, and serial number?" James looked at Matt in surprise. Seriously?

Matt smirked. "I always wanted to ask that. What's your name?"

"Tech Specialist Two Logan Johnson."

"Weapons tech?"

Johnson shrugged. "What else?"

"So, what is it you think we can help you with?" James broke in. Matt looked at him in surprise this time.

Johnson licked his lips nervously, his face paling rapidly. James could practically hear his heartbeat pounding from here. "You guys are, uh, f-, uh, queer, right?"

Matt nodded slowly. Suddenly this started to make a lot more sense to James.

"How does QESA figure out who to rescue? Who wants out?"

"We have to have a clear request for help," Matt answered. At Johnson's blank look, Matt said, "You need to request help escaping moral persecution, like if you're gay

or something. Then the Blue States of America Federal Court rules on your request—whether to extract you. Then NGOs like QESA bid on the contract, or sometimes get handed it. If you rendered assistance to an agent and a refugee, you're almost guaranteed to get okayed for extraction."

Johnson swallowed. "How should… my friend request help?"

Matt smiled. James could see him fighting the smirk that wanted to take over. "Well, if he were close by, he could simply ask me, and I would log the request. I could record it and get a voice print, but that would put your friend in danger if I were captured. Or he could make it more official—but even more dangerous—and text my hookup. Then I have proof that can definitely stand in international court. If he were close by, he could text me and it wouldn't hit a booster, wouldn't leave a signature."

Johnson swallowed hard. He was terrified, but James could feel how desperate he was to get out. He broke in. "How old are you, Logan?"

"Thirty-one."

"No family? No, um, partner?"

Johnson snorted in disbelief. "Partner? You mean like a boyfriend? Look, you guys know we're talking about me." His voice had a soft accent, now that he was letting loose a little. Backwoods twang. Growing up had to be rough on a gay boy in rural Idaho. If he'd even realized that's what he was. "There's no way I was gonna jeopardize my nuts by getting with any guy. The best I could hope for was re-education. If anyone I knew ever caught me…. And for some stupid fucking reason I thought joining the militia would *help*. Not that I had a lotta choice."

James studied him a minute longer. Finding a boyfriend, or even a one-night stand, wouldn't have been

difficult for Logan if he'd looked. Even in Idaho. He was tall and broad-shouldered, heavy bones hung with sleek but substantial muscles. His head was stubbly with a traditional military cut. And it looked like he had freckles? A redhead, maybe. Lots of guys he'd met had a ginger-boy fetish. At thirty-one in the Blue, Logan would have been experienced and confident in his ability to attract a man. Any man, really. He was hot, in a boy-next-door kind of way.

Instead all James got off Johnson was bone-deep fear and a fucked-up sense of self. Surprisingly, Johnson seemed to be aware of his messed-up self-image. James glanced at Matt. And tried not to smirk at Matt's cataloging of Johnson's attractions. Or be jealous. Hell, he'd just been doing the same thing.

And really, it was just a little bit hot that Johnson had his arms cuffed behind him, sitting on the ground while Matt and James stood over him. Time to end that. James dropped down and cut the cuffs off, then stayed kneeling. Matt crouched down next to him.

"So, leaving your family wouldn't be an issue?"

"No. My mom's gone, and the rest can all go fuck themselves. 'Cept one but he's old enough for me to leave him, now." James got the sense Logan would be sad to leave whoever he was talking about.

"You know we can't take you with us, now, right?" Matt's voice was soft.

"Yeah. Have stuff I'd need to settle first, anyway."

"So, you wanna text—"

"Prolly should think a bit on it." Terrified, now that he had the ball rolling. James didn't know how to reassure him.

So he changed the subject. He asked for details about the hunt for them. The billet at the convent was really just

a coincidence. No one thought they were there. Kandy Melore, after forcing her way into the militia's search, had been sent here with a regular militia unit to keep her out of the way.

All the major and minor routes to the Snake and into Canada were watched, electronic and human surveillance. Without actually mentioning Brownlee Dam, James managed to gather it was high on the list of suspected crossings.

Finally, James had all the info Johnson could give him. He was sort of at a loss about how to bring him back to the Enforced Emigrant issue. James could tell Johnson was as scared of trusting them with his escape as he was about being stuck in Idaho for the rest of his life.

"Hey, James. We have time for a three-way with this guy? He's kinda hot."

James gave Matt a long, stony look. Okay, aside from the fact that Matt wasn't ever fucking *any*one else, why was he messing with Johnson? James reached out and cuffed Matt lightly in the back of the head. Matt saw it coming, but didn't duck it. He grinned unrepentantly at James.

"Leave him alone," James growled. "He's a vir—inexperienced." *And he's not touching you*.

"How do you know that?"

This time James gave Matt a "what am I gonna do with you?" snort and a sardonic look. He didn't expect it to work. Matt was enjoying himself.

James couldn't see what color Johnson had turned, but he was darker than he had been. Blushing, then. James did a quick check, sensing something unexpected from Johnson. Unexpected enough that he didn't immediately recognize it.

Excitement. James forcibly kept himself from looking at the guy's package. He looked at Matt, instead.

Matt was looking at the guy's package. Of course.

Matt turned to James and leered, waggling his eyebrows. He knew Matt was just kidding around, but Johnson didn't know that. And along with the excitement, James could feel quite a bit of fear.

"Shut up, Matt," James said again. But this time he quirked a lip at Matt. Matt's eyes got bright.

He may have just been joking, not really interested in Johnson, but James needed to reassure himself a little. He reached out again, this time grabbing Matt by the back of his neck and pulling him in.

"Be a good boy," he growled, his lips a breath away from Matt's. He watched Matt's pupils widen.

It was a relatively short kiss, but it was thorough. And explicit. He forced Matt's lips open with his tongue and swept his mouth. He might even have growled a little. It was the adrenaline and the situation. And the audience.

Matt gave a little whimper. James could feel him leaning in more, moving in closer.

Suddenly, James could see them as Johnson saw them. He had Matt by the neck, was in possession of his mouth. Sitting there while forcing Matt to come to him on his knees. Matt was leaning so far forward he had to plant his hands for balance. Stretched out, head tilted slightly up, begging for it.

Stopping now might be a good idea. He started to pull away. Matt whimpered again. James gentled the kiss, soothing him. He could feel he'd shot Matt right into that bliss state he was capable of reaching, when he wanted James in full control. And for Matt, having an audience was making it hotter and sharper.

James gently extricated them from the kiss, leaning forward so Matt could rest back on his haunches, catch his balance, James letting up on his neck. Their lips parted, James gave Matt's lower lip one little nip, then a gentle kiss. "Hey, babe," he whispered.

He could see the moment Matt realized he'd totally exposed his desires to another person. He dropped his gaze, looking away from James and Johnson.

Fuckity fuck-fuck-fuck. James let Matt go completely, trying to figure out how to mitigate the damage.

"That was fucking hot," Johnson croaked, startling them both. They whipped their heads around to look at him. His skin was flushed even darker, due to arousal, now.

"'M gonna jack off to *that* every night." His voice was shaky, barely a whisper. James wondered if he even realized he'd said that aloud. He was pressing the heel of one hand into his groin, hard.

Apparently, the display did more to reassure Johnson than anything they might have said. He whipped out his hookup—not military issue, looked like a personal one—and asked for the number to text his plea to.

Matt answered him quietly. Then he gave a little grin and cleared his throat. "I guess we'll leave you alone with your hand, then."

James felt like he should apologize. They were out of immediate danger, jogging south before they swung around north and west. They'd crawled for four hundred meters before James couldn't sense any human surveillance.

He couldn't monitor Matt's mood, navigate (even with Matt on point), and keep his mind open for threats at the same time. Occasionally he let himself "peek" though, and

he got the same thing every time: Matt had shut himself off completely, again.

James slowed to a walk. Matt immediately slowed too. He glanced back at James.

Instead of looking upset, Matt looked thoughtful. James felt something hard that had balled up under his breastbone relax and unravel.

Thank fucking God.

Matt stopped, and even though they probably shouldn't yet, James stopped too. Matt reached for him, holding his hand out toward James. He was unable to not step forward.

Matt took his hand when James was close enough. "'S'alright, James. I'm still thinking, but what happened back there wasn't… bad."

This was *so* not the place for this, but James couldn't stop himself from reaching for Matt, caressing his jaw, running his hand into his hair, and gripping gently. "Matt, *you* are in control, here. I need you. You own me, no matter how it shakes out in bed. I just wanna give you what you need, no matter what it is." He gave a slow grin. "It's just coincidental that your kink fits mine so perfectly." He sobered up again. "But if it was the other way around, I'd give you that too."

James gulped back the rest of the words clamoring to get out, backing them up in his throat. For the first time in his life, he was in the position of having said too much. He'd never felt like a bigger fool. Or more vulnerable. Or more hopeful.

Matt pulled him into his body, hard. Slipping his other hand around James's waist, pressing on the small of his back, bringing them tight against each other.

James felt his sudden erection lining up next to Matt's. He felt like a live current was being passed back and forth

between them. He slipped his hand down, around to Matt's ass, kneading. Matt sucked in a breath and let go of James's hand, bringing both of his to James's ass, pressing him into his groin.

James backed Matt up against a handy tree, grinding against him and squeezing him, sliding his fingers between Matt's cheeks.

Matt went for his mouth, arching his back a little, letting go of James's body. Before James could figure it out, Matt was unsealing his fly, tucking his shorts under his sac, and then doing the same for himself.

James gasped as Matt took both of them into his hand. His long fingers could wrap almost around them, and his fingertips felt and stroked around James's glans, dipping into the slit, circling the ridge. James reached in and met Matt's hand, fisting them together, and jerking up hard.

Matt whimpered. God that sound made him crazy. James massaged Matt's ass with his free hand, sliding his fingers down and pressing into Matt's crack.

He was surging into Matt's hand, tongue-fucking his mouth. Matt had a death grip on James's ass. James slid his hand up to Matt's waist, and then forced his pants and shorts down, exposing bare skin, finding and pressing into his crack, finding his puckered hole and pushing gently, then more firmly until he popped through. Matt stifled a cry in James's mouth, and then pulled his lips off James's, head thrown back against the tree.

James was so fucking close, his hips kept falling out of rhythm. He needed more skin. He began nipping and sucking under Matt's jaw, and the salty taste of his skin—even with mud on it—made James moan.

"Ooooooh, fuck, James." James could hear Matt's hair tangling with the bark of the tree every time he thrust against him. James was pushing him onto his toes, almost

there. He bit down on Matt's neck, where the tendon ran. Matt cut off his wail, trying to be quiet.

Matt gripped James harder as he thrust into his grip, grunting. Matt's thumb flicked up over James's head, gliding against the bundle of nerves at the base then catching the pre-come welling out of the slit. James dropped his head into Matt's shoulder, mouth open against his neck, panting.

"Christ, Matt, gonna…."

"Please," Matt panted, squeezing James harder. He swiveled his hips a little, dragging his cock across James's, and he lost it.

"Fuck!" It came out through gritted teeth, but it was damn close to a yell. He came all over their stomachs and rucked-up shirts, his come flowing over their hands as he stroked through his orgasm.

When he couldn't stand anymore, he sank down to his knees, resting his forehead on Matt's bare hip. Matt was making those whimpering noises and thrusting into their still-joined fists. James kissed the skin he could find, panting.

"Gimme minute," he gasped out. Matt was beyond hearing him.

It occurred to James that anyone within fifty meters could hear Matt, though.

He found the energy to pull himself back and grip Matt's hips, stilling them. Matt whined, eyes screwed shut, fighting to move his hips. James engulfed the head of Matt's cock with his mouth and he yelped.

James pulled off. "Matt!" he hissed. Belatedly, Matt opened his eyes and looked down at James. "You have to be quiet, baby."

Matt stared at him a minute, then nodded.

James wasn’t convinced he got the message. “Stuff your fist in your mouth.” More blinking, then Matt did it.

He’d just told Matt to stuff his hand in his mouth to keep him quiet. But looking up at Matt biting down on his knuckles because James ordered him to? Was hot.

Still looking up at Matt, James took him back into his mouth. Matt whimpered around his hand. James moaned, causing another whimper, and took Matt in to the back of his soft palate. Then he started a fast rhythm. Suck on the up stroke, swirl his tongue around Matt’s head, glide down. Matt started to close his eyes.

James stopped. He gave a gentle head shake. Matt nodded, staring down at him.

James finished him quickly, watching Matt stare back at him because James told him to. Biting his fist because James ordered it.

He could feel Matt’s thighs tense, and took him into his throat, swallowing around him. Matt gave a muffled cry and started pumping seed into James’s throat, moaning and shaking. Sweat broke out on his forehead.

James sucked Matt until he was limp, holding him against the tree. Then he put him back into his pants and shorts, sealing the fly.

Matt’s eyes were closed now, his hand lax next to James’s head, the impression of his teeth clear on his knuckles. James kissed his hand.

He smiled as he straightened, holding Matt up still. “C’mon babe. I know you’re all sucked out, but we gotta move,” he whispered in Matt’s ear.

Matt nodded. And melted back into the tree.

James sighed, picked up the DEW rifle, and crouched down, slinging Matt over his shoulder and straightening by pushing against the tree. “This should be fun.”

It wasn’t like his legs were much more reliable than Matt’s right now. He grinned, slapped Matt’s ass once—earning only a “Huh?” and a twitch—and headed west.

He made it about two steps before Matt slapped his ass in return. “What are you *doing*? We’re supposed to be fleeing for our lives and you’re fucking carrying me? Put me down!”

James laughed softly at Matt’s disgruntled expression when he set him on his feet. Yeah, they were on the run, but somehow, as long as Matt wasn’t in immediate danger, it seemed almost fun.

—CHAPTER 20—

THEY looped to the southwest around Cambridge proper, and then met up with the defunct Idaho Power high-transmission towers, most of which were still standing. They led directly northwest to the dam, and there were old access roads to the towers for easier trailblazing. Matt knew it would be rough going nearer Hells Canyon, but Johnson hadn't mentioned surveillance on that route.

They met Beni and Miz at the junction of 71 and the transmission lines. And they spent the next two kilometers listening to Beni complain about (1) having to wait more than an hour for them to arrive while hiding in a ditch (which Miz somehow kept her in, despite Beni's protests; Matt suspected big teeth were involved); (2) her aching bottom, which did not take kindly to "bumping along" on Miz's back; and (3) needing to find a decent "little girls' tree." She mentioned frequently that one—or both—of them rubbing her aching bottom would greatly relieve her discomfort.

Finally, Matt faked a surveillance alarm, one that required them to keep moving but stay as silent as possible. "What was that alarm?" James asked quietly when they had stopped at the next little girls' tree.

"It's the alarm that tells me the people I'm extracting talk too much."

"Oh." James smiled.

They were well into what the GPS told them was Advent Gulch when Matt decided he'd had it. He wanted to go home, to the family's ranch. To the old bunkhouse out the back door he'd converted into his own space. His shoulder hurt, he was still exhausted from the nano-menders, and probably he was drained from the orgasm James had sucked out of him against that tree near Cambridge. He just wanted a big, soft bed and James wrapped around him in it. Preferably in a postcoital haze.

This whole trip, in spite of having to divert far off the original, and the secondary, and even the tertiary plan, in spite of being wounded, had been somehow easy. James was easy to be with. He liked being with James. He loved being with James. He needed to suck it up and admit he was in love with James.

They were behind enemy lines, being pursued by AI and humans, dragging along Sister Maligna, and he was recovering from the worst wound he'd suffered since leaving the military. And he was happy. Fuck the questions about submission and control. He'd accepted he was a dedicated bottom—he could accept this.

Accept it? Shit, he fucking loved it. When James had had him on his knees, begging for it in front of Logan, he was so turned on he was out of his mind. James did something to him that sent him into orbit, and he wasn't letting go of that.

Matt stopped that train of thought before things got out of hand and made himself focus on the current priority. Getting them the fuck out of here. They were on the home stretch, now.

They stopped to camp somewhere on a ridge above the gulch. They were in a drainage ditch somewhere near the top, plenty of brush to hide them from the air, but James made a point of camping close to rocky ground.

After they ate, Beni dropped off to sleep immediately. Matt had relented and told her she didn't have to keep quiet anymore, but by then she'd been exhausted. Apparently the life of a nun wasn't too physically arduous. Miz snorted horse snot out on her and wandered off to crop some of the grass and maybe some nice brush.

James took first watch. "Sleep a while, babe. You're better, but not a hundred percent."

"Just promise you'll wake me up, James. You need to sleep too." James promised, but Matt didn't entirely believe him. He was too exhausted to argue, but he set his internal alarm to wake him up in five hours.

Almost five hours later it wasn't James who woke him up, but his leg. It was starting the percussive thumping that signaled SAIA.

"James!" He quickly turned his head toward Matt, alerted by Matt's tone. "SAIA."

James looked back down the drainage while he picked up the digi-camo he had out and ready. "I'm probably looking right at the fucker. Jesus, they're good at camouflaging those things."

Beni was close by, but she needed to be in the rocky area with them under the digi. Matt didn't even bother trying to wake her up. He just dragged her over, bedroll and all. It was going to be a tight fit, even worse with Miz. Beni would probably be less of a liability asleep. He shot a glance at James, and figured by the slightly faraway look in his eyes he was calling to the mare.

Miz must have been sleeping, too, and when she came thundering up she was drooling green, grassy spit and farting. Matt rolled his eyes.

During the two minutes it took them to get organized, the thrumming in his leg was getting stronger. He could

swear the bird was practically on them. And personally? He wasn't interested in another run-in with one.

He didn't even bother speaking with James, just opened his mind. James ordered Miz down (well, she lay down, at any rate) and he lay right up against her back, their packs arranged perpendicular to their heads. Matt yanked Beni close and lay down right next to James while he arranged the digi-camo over them.

He couldn't be positive, but Matt could swear the bird was on top of them seconds after they got under the digi-camo. The bird was close enough to them that they could hear its blade slicing the air now. His leg was thrumming so much he expected it to start ringing like a tuning fork.

It was there forever. It must have sensed something. Just when he could feel James tensing, like he was about to take some action, the bird finally started to move away.

Matt's muscles relaxed all at once, like he was coming down from a seizure. "Jesus Henry Christ," he whispered to himself. James slipped an arm around Matt's waist and kissed the back of his neck.

"I think they're just searching all the drainages near the old highway. Johnson said it was one of the routes they were focusing on. Coincidence." They were close enough to 71 from here they could practically see it.

Matt was suddenly so relaxed—so drained—he thought he might be able to fall asleep right here, even with the sharp rock digging into his thigh. He could feel James relaxing behind him. Miz was snorting a little, kicking out her legs and hauling herself up, pulling the digi-camo along with her until Matt reached out a hand and grabbed it. James didn't have a free hand; he was too busy stroking a thumb between Matt's pecs.

Miz stood, finally free of the digi-camo, snorted once indignantly, and wandered off. Matt could feel James's lips

on the back of his neck, curving into a smile. “Now she’s mad at us for making her lie under the digi-camo.”

Matt laughed silently, but didn’t say anything. He snuggled further into James. James tightened his grip.

Would it be so bad if no one but Miz was on watch? They could lie here under the digi-camo and drowse. They’d be safe with all the sensors they had. And Matt’s leg. He wondered what James was thinking.

Judging by James’s even breathing, he wasn’t thinking much. If he wasn’t asleep, he was nearly there. Matt took a second to dig the rock out from under him, let his eyelids drop, and settled in a little.

That’s when Beni woke up, of course.

“Oh! What are we under this blanket for?” Matt gave an exasperated sigh. James woke up, lying still but alert. Neither one of them said anything, waiting to see what Beni would do.

She snuggled back into Matt.

He leapt up, the digi-camo slithering off him. “Don’t you put your ass in my groin ever again, you nymphomaniacal little nun!”

Beni pushed herself up on her hands and looked back over her shoulder at him. She studied his face. Then the lip started pouting. “Dammit! You aren’t any fun.” She flopped back down, then rolled over on her back and looked at James inquiringly.

“Don’t look at me,” he said. “I’m no fun, either.” He rolled over and wrapped himself in the digi-camo.

Matt guessed it was his watch.

IT WAS dawn after their second night, and they were looking down at the Brownlee Ranger Station. It was crawling with militia. Matt scratched his head, where some of the brush James had decorated—his word had been “camouflaged”—it with was poking at him.

“This shit itches.” Was he whining? It didn’t sound that whiny to him. But judging by the look James shot him, he was whining.

“That shit is keeping your head from looking like a head.”

Matt just sighed. “Fuck, I hope we can trust Beni by herself back at the camp.”

James snorted in agreement. They’d installed Beni under an overhang beside a mostly dry creek bed and climbed up the bank. Then James had decorated him, and they’d half crouched, half belly-crawled their way to this overlook.

“Miz is watching her,” James pointed out.

It was Matt’s turn to snort. Jesus, the only one of their party who didn’t snort was Beni. Matt was giving her another twenty-four hours before she started. She certainly had glaring and pouting down pat. At least Beni wouldn’t spray out horse boogers when she snorted.

Hopefully, in twenty-four hours, Beni would be someone else’s problem. Like some poor, straight SOUF trooper.

“Yeah, Miz looked thrilled about that. She must have learned about pouting from watching Beni.” James had to stifle a laugh. Their conversation was subvocal, but the laugh would have stood out like an undecorated head.

In order to speak so softly, they had to be really, really close, of course. Matt hooked his ankle over James’s leg. James shot him an unreadable look. What was that?

James had been acting a little weird. After waking up yesterday, he'd been a little bit distant. It might just be the stress of the trip. It was probably hard on James to be in charge of the little group. He was responsible for the welfare of his lover, a nun, and a talking horse. That couldn't be easy.

Matt was willing to admit James was the better soldier of the two of them, and far better trained in wilderness survival skills. He was content to let him run the show. It made Matt feel secure. (And he really, really wasn't thinking about all the implications of that.)

His neurotic self was telling him James was losing interest in him, because he was too clingy. Matt ignored that voice. But he unhooked his ankle from James's leg.

"We can probably head back. It looks like pretty normal activity down there. I think it hasn't occurred to anyone that we might go overland. They seem to be focusing teams on the highways and trails."

James didn't sound completely confident in that, and Matt was dubious too. But they slid backward off the rise they'd been on and crawled until they could walk back to camp.

When they got there Beni was half-naked, brushing her long (and very attractive, even Matt could see that) hair and humming some song. Matt cocked his head, looking at her, opening his mind to James. He caught James's surprised jerk out of the corner of his eye.

If Matt were straight, would this picture of innocent seduction work, or would he have seen through it then, too? And if he'd seen through it, would he still take advantage of it? Probably. Guys were guys were guys.

He tried to picture James setting up some similar seduction, but it was just too ridiculous. He started laughing out loud. James did too.

“You were broadcasting that picture,” James said through his laughter. Matt was looking at him, so he didn’t actually see the brush coming toward them, but he watched it bounce off James’s head.

James stopped laughing abruptly, and turned to Beni. He had the stony look, but Matt could see the fire in his eyes.

“This is gonna be fugly,” he whispered to himself.

It wasn’t, really. James just calmly picked up the brush and walked toward Beni. She looked terrified, biting her fingernails and watching James advance on her. He stopped, looked down at her a moment, then held out the brush. Hesitantly, Beni reached for it.

But when she tried to take it, he didn’t let go. “What is your problem?” James asked.

Her eyes began to fill, and her lips trembled. Then she scrunched up her face in possibly one of the most unattractive looks on any woman, ever, and she wailed, “Neither of you wants to f-f-fuck me!” For a nun, she’d taken to the F word like a fish to water.

James let go of the brush and planted his hands on his hips, staring down at Beni while she sobbed. Matt thought they had to be real tears. She had snot streaming down her red face, with an awful scrunchy look on it. Definitely not the demure crying she’d probably practiced in front of the mirror. He was pretty familiar with that.

When she’d calmed down a little, James said in his I’m-trying-to-be-patient-with-you voice, “We’re gay, Beni. We like to fuck men. Men with penises and body hair.”

“I have body hair,” she sobbed.

“Well, your lack of a penis is a deal-breaker, honey.” James was starting to sound amused.

Beni sobbed more, but once she'd finally calmed down a little, she tried again. "Wouldn't you like to know what it's like to sleep with a woman? Just once?" She included Matt in her question.

"I've been with women, Beni. I prefer men."

Matt decided not to mention his own complete lack of experience with women. It would just muddy the issue. He moved forward to stand beside James and looked down at Beni.

"Listen, Beni, you're a virgin, right?" James asked her in a kindly, brotherly tone.

"Y-yes." She nodded.

"Wouldn't you like your first time to be special? With someone you love, who loves you?"

She looked at him blankly. "No." She was well and truly bewildered.

They were at an impasse. Matt could feel James drawing a deep breath, like he was about to start on a new tack. This could go on all day.

"Beni," Matt spoke up, "tomorrow night we're going to swim across the river, and then we'll be in Oregon. There'll be at least six Special Forces troops on the other side, waiting for us. I'm willing to bet at least three of them are men, and statistically they can't all be gay." *As long as they aren't related to me*. "One of them will probably be happy to relieve you of your virginity. Or whatever."

She looked at him suspiciously. She had tears and other gunk dripping off her chin, but she'd stopped crying. "Are you *sure* there will be men there? Straight men." She swiped her face with her forearm.

"I swear."

She gave a harrumphing sigh and crossed her arms. Apparently more diplomatic action was necessary. "It's not

that James and I don’t appreciate your offers, of course. We’re just, you know, we’re gay.” She eyed him a bit.

“And you’re together, right? Like, exclusively?”

“Ummm, yeah.” It was the best answer for the situation. He hoped like hell James was all right with that. But he would be, right? After all the things he’d said the other night? He’d said he needed him. He’d said Matt *owned* him. He’d be all right with that.

“Well, I guess…,” Beni finally conceded, a little reluctantly. She took the brush and started looking for the shirt she’d removed before they got back. Hopefully to put it back on.

Matt turned to look at James.

James didn’t look okay with what he’d said. His face had that stony, unreadable mask on it. But his dark golden eyes looked really, really sad. He walked off before Matt could say anything.

Shit.

—CHAPTER 21—

The ranger station had been crawling with militia who'd been so focused on the highway that it was easy to slip around the back of the station with no one noticing. They'd had to put Beni on Miz (neither one of them liked that) and send her on a bigger loop out of sight of the station, while James and Matt stayed close enough to keep an eye on activities there. They rendezvoused within a couple klicks of what was left of Brownlee Reservoir.

They were well-hidden, just above the road overlooking the reservoir. Maybe 150 meters from the old dam. James was lookout, while Matt dealt with Beni. Strangely, since the scene this morning, Matt had seemed more patient with her, and James was less.

Matt left Beni in camp, with strict orders to lay low and keep quiet. Miz stood guard over her without his having to say a thing. "You starting to enjoy your power, girl?" He patted the mare affectionately on the nose. She nickered and bobbed her head. Or maybe that was a snicker.

Beni managed not to sulk. Her attitude had hugely improved with the promise of straight, horny men on the horizon.

Matt crept up behind James, keeping his mind sealed tight. He got within five meters before James turned to him and grinned.

“Did you feel me coming?”

A momentary cloud passed over James’s face. “No, you pretty much shut yourself off to me. I could hear you. That fake leg just doesn’t sound quite right. I could hear it slither a little.”

“Shit, there goes my career in covert ops.” He didn’t even want a career as a SOUF trooper anymore, but it was still a bummer. James gave him a little squeeze on the back of his neck then dropped his hand.

“You’re still in covert ops, babe. What else do you call your job?”

Amazing how that could make it all better. Matt stared at James’s profile a minute. He could afford to; James was lookout. Matt could just be on the lookout for James.

James’s whole life was so fucked up. He had a mutant alien brain, he was being forced out of SOUF, he was going to be forced into QESA, and military scientists were going to poke at him like he was a lab rat as often as they could manage. More than anything, Matt wanted to stay with James and work with him at QESA. He wanted to live with him. He wanted James to love him, not be forced to stay with Matt through circumstance and gratitude.

Matt sighed.

“’S’up, babe?” James asked a little absently.

“Nothing. Just, you know… thinking.” James gave him a piercing glance. Then he let his eyes rove the area again. Matt checked his mental walls. Tight. They had to stay that way until James gave him a clear sign that this was what he wanted. Matt didn’t want to add his own emotions to James’s situation. The guy needed space to think.

Matt heard a noise. “’S’that a burrowing owl? They have those here?”

“Pretty much everywhere in the US, still. Got too hot in Mexico for them. Been hearing it for a while now.” James’s eyes were trained on a small boat with three fishermen near the Oregon side of the reservoir.

Matt wrinkled his brow. “You heard it a bunch of times? That same call?’

James turned to look at him. “Yeah. That mean something?”

“Maybe.” Matt cupped his hands around his mouth and responded with a different burrowing owl call. Within seconds he got an answering call. He sat forward excitedly.

The guys fishing were suddenly packing it in. It was just barely starting to get dark, so it seemed a little early to be quitting, but…. James was sitting attentively, waiting for Matt to tell him what was going on. “That’s my family call. We each have one, a bird or something. The grampas made us learn ours practically right after birth. You got a scope on you?” Stupid question. Of course James was prepared.

Matt took the scope James handed over. “Push the button on top for remote viewing.”

Matt gave him a dry look. “I’m not completely unfamiliar with tech, you know.”

“Sorry.” James gave a sheepish grin.

When Matt had the scope trained on the boat, he could see the three fishermen reeling in lines, packing up bait. Old-fashioned fishing, the kind the grampas used to make them do. One of the guys on the boat turned just right. “’S Jude,” Matt complained.

At James’s blank look, he explained, “My cousin, Jude. Oh, that’s cool, though, I see Sabine. Can’t tell who the third one is. Hope he’s straight,” Matt added in a mutter.

“So they’re waiting for us,” James murmured thoughtfully. “Wanted you to know they were there, even

see them.”

Suddenly, one of the people on the boat fell into the water. Matt snorted, the scope still to his eye. “Jude fell in, the clumsy bastard. Not really like him, though.” He put the scope down and looked at James. “Diversion, you think?”

“To keep anyone from noticing that guy crawling out of the water, you mean?” James nodded his head toward the shore, about thirty meters downslope.

Matt swung his head around. Someone *was* crawling out of the water. There wasn’t that much cover by the reservoir. It was mostly dirt, rocks, and a few formerly submerged tree stumps. The guy coming out was wearing night-camo, but it was barely dusk. Now that Matt knew he was there, it was easy to pick him out.

“It’s Dyson,” he told James happily. It was nice to see the cavalry, but it was extra nice that it was Dyson and not Jude. “Another cousin.” He turned, a big grin on his face. James had a strange expression on his. Like he was annoyed.

Matt was still trying to puzzle that out when James turned back to the water. Matt mentally shrugged—for now—and gave the call for Dyson. A chipmunk—he was one of the younger grandkids, and they were running short on animal calls when he was born. Matt could almost see the disgruntled look on Dyson’s face when he heard the call. But he answered it.

Matt snuck a look at James again. He had his expressionless mask on. Probably for Dyson’s benefit. But his lips were quirking up on one side. “Chipmunk, huh?”

Matt smirked. “He’s lucky they didn’t stick him with feral cat or something.”

Dyson was headed straight for them, now that he had a direction. Within a minute he'd crawled into their brush screen with them.

Matt introduced James and immediately realized it was a mistake. He could practically see the attraction between them. Fuck.

Dyson was very different from Matt. Broad and muscular—built a lot like James, actually—and a little taller. He had dark brown hair in not quite a military cut, and hazel eyes. Dyson was hot, especially because he had almost no clue how sexy he was. And he definitely thought James was hot. Matt knew all his little tells.

Matt swallowed down the jealousy. It wouldn't help any of them right now. Or later, either, actually.

James turned to look at Matt suddenly. He looked a little sheepish. And didn't that just twist Matt's heart in his chest. Matt gave him a little smile. James reached out to Matt, sliding a hand up his back to his neck, giving him a little squeeze.

Matt sighed. Th'fuck was he doing, being jealous? One look told Matt that Dyson was feeling guilty and embarrassed because he'd been attracted to a guy who had something going on with his cousin.

Matt gave a gentle shoulder shrug, dislodging James's hand. Probably shouldn't rub it in.

"What are you doing here? Did the grampas send you?" He tried to refocus everyone.

"Yeah. Going into basic training next month, but I'm not official yet, so Laslo sent me across the river to find you." Oh, yeah. He'd just turned eighteen.

"Laslo's here? And Jude and Sabine on the boat? Who else?"

“That’s it. We brought a skimmer, so Holland from Laslo’s Delta 6 team is here. Laslo’s team medic Wade Bollinger, Van Vanos—new QESA agent—and a SEAL, Analia Leondri. This was a last-minute thing and we took who we could get.”

“Christ. Did you bring any straight guys?”

“Holland’s straight. Kinda. The other guys are straight. Wade Bollinger and the new QESA agent, Vanos.”

“Holland just lost his wife. Don’t want to subject him to this mission.”

Dyson gave him a confused look, but just said, “Sabine’s straight.”

“I need a *guy*.”

Dyson laughed softly. “Yeah, Matt. Everyone here needs a guy, but I think you’re the only one with a prayer of getting one.” He flicked a look to James.

“What about Conner?”

“He’s on an op in the east somewhere. One of the Carolinas, I think. Jesus, Matt, even if you did need a guy, why would you want a straight one?”

Matt slowly smiled and looked over at James. “We need someone to fuck the nun.”

James snorted in amusement.

“Th’fuck are you talking about?”

So Matt explained about Beni, and then he went on to explain about Miz. And then a little about their journey. Dyson insisted on looking at his shoulder wound. It was closed, but barely.

“Hurt?”

“Nah, not really. It’s mostly just itched for days. Pearl must have given me some NSAIDs that were better than average.”

“We gotta stop yakking and get with the program, here. Laslo sent me to set you guys up with SCUBAs. Can the nun use one?”

“She’ll learn.” Matt’s tone was dry.

“What about the horse?”

Matt froze. He turned to James. “Babe?” Dyson looked confused as hell. He’d made the horse comment purely as a joke, Matt knew.

“Uhhh,” James stalled. “I guess I didn’t think about that. I’ll have to ask her.”

Dyson looked at James strangely. “You can talk to the horse?”

“Yeah. Didn’t anyone brief you on my mutant alien brain?”

Matt reached out and grabbed James’s hand. He could hear the derision in James’s voice, and hated that he felt that way. James squeezed back after a second.

“Yeah, but not the details,” Dyson said, looking away.

“What are you doing here?” Matt tried to refocus on logistics.

“Getting you guys the fuck out, ASAP.” Dyson went on to explain that when Lance had told SOUF about James’s *new* new abilities, he suddenly rated transport by skimmer once he was across the river. Or even on this side of the river, if necessary.

James snorted in disgust. Matt squeezed his hand. “’S’okay, babe.” Matt realized he was going all out with the endearments and touching as a way of staking his claim. Should he stand up and piss on James next? That could be interesting.

“So why don’t they just come over and get me?” James asked. “Maybe I should fake a broken leg or something.

Then the nun can miraculously heal me once we're on the skimmer."

Dyson laughed. "Yeah, the skimmer has orders to stay on that side unless you're in danger of capture by the RIA or other hostiles, or can't make it across yourself. You know, 'extenuating circumstances'." Matt figured that ninety-nine percent of the battles between the Red and Blue in the past ten years had begun over "extenuating circumstances."

"Thanks a lot," James grumbled.

Matt agreed. Fuckers. They'd been on the run from the RIA for a week now, and picked up a horny nun and a talking pet horse. Those *were* extenuating circumstances.

Still, they were well-rested for the most part, in good health. Well, except Matt's wounds were a little too close to healed for comfort. He wondered if the skimmer would come over if *he* were suffering from extenuating circumstances.

"So, Van's in the water behind me; he's got remote viewing headgear. He can keep an eye open, and we'll go back to camp to get your shit together and plan this out." Dyson nodded to James. He clicked in to Van, a complicated SF Morse code. Matt had to brush up on it, because he wasn't sure if Dyson had just told Van to come out and rendezvous or bring them lunch. Kinda late for lunch.

Van belly-crawled up the bank, invisible until Matt used the NV on the scope. Then he was only almost invisible. When he got into their little brush pile (no lunches in hand), even crouching Matt could tell he was a huge guy. Sandy-brown hair, maybe, light-colored eyes. He shook their hands, but didn't say much of anything.

Dyson said the guy was straight, and that was the vibe Matt got. Mostly because he didn't spend any time checking the three of them out. Matt had to admit it made

him a little extra leery of the new agent. He wasn't part of the fam, aside from being new and untested.

On the other hand, it looked like both his legs were factory originals. Dyson prodded Matt, sending him on ahead. James was already moving out.

Back at the small camp, Miz snorted angrily at them, horse boogers flying. Apparently Beni had been giving her trouble. Beni was the picture of innocence, of course. Very suspicious.

"Ooooh," she breathed as they slipped into the stand of pines and underbrush. "A *man*."

James snorted in disgust. Dyson stopped like he'd hit a wall, and stared at Beni a second. "Uh, you're the nun?"

"*Former* nun." Her tone was a little bit snippy, and a lot firm.

"Sorry, Beni. He's batting for our team."

Beni's shoulders slumped and her lip poked out. Now she snorted in disgust. It was a snortfest. "Shit," she muttered.

"There are two more guys on the other side who are probably going to be interested," Matt added quickly, hoping to avoid a tantrum. "It'll motivate you to swim faster when we cross." He decided not to mention Van's current location.

Beni got a look of total confusion on her face. "Swim? We aren't taking a boat?"

"Not very covert."

"Oh." She gave him a mildly troubled look. "I can't swim."

"Is that extenuating enough?" James asked Dyson dryly after a short silence.

“Dammit, Beni, I told you earlier. You could have mentioned you can’t swim then.”

“I don’t remember that.” She shrugged nonchalantly. “When was it?”

“This *morning*,” Matt snapped.

“Oh. I was thinking about the men you promised me.” Beni sniffed and flipped her hair. Then she inspected her nails.

“All right, let’s just figure this shit out.” James sat down. Matt could tell he’d about reached his bullshit threshold. James turned to Dyson. “She doesn’t need to really swim, just kick. But how do we get her past the spillway? The current’ll be strong there.”

“We have an underwater cable run across. Leondri did it this afternoon with a submarine-bot.”

“Under*water*?” Beni’s voice got high and quavery. Matt and James looked at her a second. James turned to Matt and nodded sharply.

Lovely. She wasn’t faking it. She was fucking terrified.

“Fuck this,” James growled. “Do I outrank anyone over there?”

Dyson grinned. “Pretty much everyone, First Lieutenant. ’Cept Laslo. And Holland, but he’s piloting the skimmer.”

James started grumbling, but Matt was grinning. He turned to Beni. “Start packing up our shit. We’re going home.” Beni looked at him, bewildered. She’d never packed any of it in the first place. Or unpacked, for that matter.

Dyson laughed. “Laslo wanted to send the skimmer instead of me, Lieutenant. All I have to do is com and he’ll have her moving. ’Bout fifteen minutes out.” Dyson got on his com while Matt started breaking down what little was

out. James must be calling Miz back, since he was staring off into space. She'd wandered off.

Dyson no sooner sent his message to Laslo than someone clicked in to him. Three clicks.

Fuck, even Matt remembered that one. "Who is it?" He could see Dyson inspecting his readout.

"'S Van." Dyson was trying to get more info, like direction and number of who was coming at them. Van wasn't answering. How the hell had they snuck up on them?

"Leave whatever isn't critical. Us out, Beni in the middle." James was using his command voice.

Matt's cock kind of liked the command voice. He ignored it, for now.

"Where th'fuck's Beni?" James sounded pissed. Matt looked around. She'd disappeared.

"I swear to fucking God, if she went to find a little girls' tree right now, I'm gonna—" Matt broke off when they heard a screech. Not a terrified screech—a pissed-off screech.

"I was *peeing*!" They heard Beni scream at someone. "Don't you know any better than to give a nun privacy when she pees?"

They had just long enough to get their weapons out and move into a small group facing out before three soldiers in RIA militia insignia appeared. Bearing weapons. And full body armor. With blast helmets.

The guy at three o'clock was, like, a mountain man, huge and hairy. At least, he looked hairy from the little Matt could see. His blast helmet was on, but his face shield was up, his beard leaking out. Matt shifted to face him directly.

He looked over to see the guy facing James. It was, somewhat predictably, Kandy Melore. She'd taken her helmet off, and was sneering at James.

Matt could sense more than see that there was a third guy at about eight o'clock. He could feel Dyson shift, probably to face Bachelor #3. James pushed in closer on Matt's wounded shoulder, just barely touching him.

"There's a fourth," James subvocalized. "With Beni." His expression was his stony mask, but Matt could tell by looking at him James was pissed and worried as hell. He flicked a look at Matt. Reassurance. Either for himself or Matt. Maybe both.

"What about Van?" Dyson asked from their backs.

"They knocked him out with something long range. I think that's all." I.e., he wasn't dead.

The soldier with Beni came into the clearing. Beni was surprisingly cooperative. Maybe it was because the guy was hot. Or because he let her get her pants up.

Funny, Matt would have thought she'd be more cooperative if he'd let her keep her pants down.

This soldier had taken off his helmet, too. And oh, fuck, it was Tech Specialist Johnson who had Beni by the arm. Matt swore if that fucker betrayed them, he would haunt the bastard for the rest of his afterlife.

"'S'okay," James subbed.

"Well, well, well, looky what we got here." Melore seemed to be in charge. And doing her best to sound like a redneck bigot. "It's the escaping faggot, and his faggot friends."

What an original line. Matt felt like rolling his eyes.

James made no response. Matt could feel the tension in his body, and in Dyson's. He could use a beer himself.

“Oh, my saviors!” Beni suddenly started in. “I’ve been the prisoner of these horrible men for days, now, and finally someone has come to rescue me!” She batted her eyelashes at the men, ignoring Melore.

“You didn’t run voluntarily with these criminals, Sister Benigna?” Melore asked. Of course she knew who Beni was.

“No! Why ever would I have done that?” Beni could really pour on the affronted virgin when she wanted to. “What are you suggesting? Just wait until I tell the Mother Superior what you’re insinuating, you dirty soldier!”

Jesus H. Christ.

“’S’okay,” James told Matt. Again.

“No offense, Sister. But you seemed to be interested in going with these guys when we met at the convent. It’s not clear to me that you were taken against your will.” Without looking back at Beni, Melore dismissed her. “On the other hand, Specialist Johnson seems to have you under control.”

Matt sincerely hoped this was Kandy Melore’s first mistake. Of many.

“So.” Melore turned back to them. “You, Ayala, are expected back in RIA custody as soon as we can get you there. I understand they’re setting up a lab you’ll be very comfortable in for the rest of your life.” She sneered. Clearly, if it were up to her, James would be dead already. Then she gave a nasty grin. “But your companions? They’re about to become collateral damage.”

Beni gasped. Kinda what Matt felt like doing. He could feel James tense even further next to him, preparing to jump Melore. “When I go,” James said.

“What about the guy with Beni?” Dyson asked.

“Think he’s taken care of. One way or another.” Matt crossed his fingers. Beni was on their side (he was pretty

sure), and Johnson hopefully was too. He hoped Beni had a clue how to incapacitate him, even briefly, just in case. She could do a lot of damage with a hairbrush, after all.

"'S'okay," James said. *Again*. Was every-fucking-thing okay with this man? Because it didn't seem like that so much to Matt. "Just chill." The guy across from Matt took a menacing step forward.

"No talking!" he barked, aiming his weapon at Matt's forehead.

"Oh!" Beni exclaimed. "You're going to *shoot* them? That's so… barbaric." What, she wanted them burned at the stake? "Maybe I should give them last rites? Pray for their souls?"

Someone's mama made her go to church, because Melore hesitated, then said, "Well, Sister, I guess someone oughtta pray over the poor bastards. And yourself. But we'll need to disarm them, first. For your safety," she said mockingly.

"How are you gonna do that, Kandy?" James asked calmly. Matt got the feeling he wasn't really that interested, just playing an expected role.

"Well, the way I see it, we have body armor, you guys don't." She held up one finger to illustrate her first point, waving her laser pistol a little in the other hand. "Two, we're all gonna aim at your little boyfriend, there." She moved her pistol to Matt, her aim steady on his head. "And three, we got a disruptor."

Shit. So she could pulse it and their weapons wouldn't work. But neither would theirs…. Matt opened his mouth.

"And it's directional." Melore grinned at them, as if she'd just given them some kind of gift.

Bitch. Beyond bitch. This went into C-word territory.

James didn’t say anything, just threw his weapon out in front of him about two meters. Reluctantly, Matt followed suit. After another second or two, he could hear Dyson’s hit the ground.

“And your com.” Melore said, taking a couple of steps toward Matt, aiming the pistol directly at his forehead. Matt could feel sweat prickling out on his back.

As he heard Dyson’s earpiece make a soft thud in the dirt, Matt remembered. The skimmer. It was already scrambled. How much longer did they have before she just went ahead and shot? They were going to kill him, she’d said. Was James trying to stall until the skimmer came?

He couldn’t figure out what James wanted from him. If only they had a way to communi—

Oh, shit he was a dumbfuck. Matt opened his mind to James, and instead of knowing intellectually James was connecting, he could actually feel it this time. And he got a message in return. Not so much words, but feelings. Confidence, worry, a little bit of fear, an effort to be calm, and underlying it all, how much James felt for him.

It was fucking amazing. What the hell had he been worried about? James had a plan, or something, because he seemed… anticipatory. Waiting for something. Matt relaxed a tiny bit. James had it all under control.

At Kandy Melore’s go-ahead, Beni stepped forward. Johnson took a small step sideways, putting him slightly behind Melore. His weapon was now aimed more at Melore rather than them.

Could Beni actually give last rites? She stepped forward to Matt and started mumbling something authentic-sounding. Everyone was utterly still. He still had two pistols aimed at his head, maybe three. Beni mumbled in his face, making esoteric hand gestures. He could feel his heart pounding in his ears. And a cricket. No, that

stupid insect that just droned along on late-summer days. What the fuck was it called? He looked around for a second, just moving his eyes. It really had been a beautiful, mid-fall day. If he was going to die, at least he'd had one last nice day.

Beni was still droning. Kinda like the insect. Just as repetitive too. Slowly, Matt's mind clued in. She was trying to tell him something. He listened closely.

"… disruptor grenade, two minutes…." He gave a slight start when it penetrated. James had a disruptor grenade? Beni had been starting to look a little exasperated with him, but she caught his widening eyes, finished up, and moved on to Dyson.

Matt started counting the seconds in his head, his mind whirling. When had she slipped a grenade to James? Disruptor grenades were big, hard to conceal. Matt didn't think she could hold one in her hand and completely conceal it. And they were fucking expensive, still not standard equipment. Where did she get one?

And she wasn't even "praying" over James; she was with Dyson. They didn't have a minute to go, did they? He checked in with James, mentally. He got nothing but calm and love.

Love? Did James love him? That'd be nice. Fantastic, actually. Ideal. But not really something he ought to be focusing on now, since once that grenade went off, they'd all be fighting hand-to-hand, and he had Mountain Man to take care of.

Matt refocused, his brain and his mind, and looked at Private Mountain. Shit, the guy was big. Maybe he could trade James for Melore? He glanced over to the woman still holding a gun to his head, and caught movement. Behind her.

It was Johnson, and he was slipping an arm out from behind his back. In it was a blue-gray metal cylinder, just longer than his grip. As Matt watched, he saw Logan move his thumb, arming the grenade. Then he let it fly. Three seconds to explosion. Everyone froze.

Fuck, was it the simple disruptor kind, or a disruptor-frag?

Two seconds.

“Th’fuck?” asked a bewildered Kandy Melore. That thing had come from behind her. She whirled around.

One second.

Melore swung back around and re-aimed at Matt.

That fucking bitch’s gonna kill me. Matt watched her finger on the trigger, and behind her he could see Logan bringing up his pistol. Dimly he was aware of bodies hitting the ground. Taking cover? Hmm, might be smart.

Three seconds. Johnson aimed at Melore, but Matt knew he was too late. The grenade exploded just as she pulled the trigger, and then there was a blinding flash of light.

—CHAPTER 22—

JAMES lunged for Matt. He was unconscious and going down. His prosthesis was blasted open and the titanium had gone molten, some hitting his other calf. James was just in time to catch Matt's head before it hit the ground.

He cataloged all this clinically, in some detached part of his brain. Mostly, though, his brain was freaking out. "Matt!"

He's alive, the detached part of his brain informed him. And suddenly James realized he could still *feel* Matt, in his mind. He was alive, unconscious. James wrapped his arms around Matt, rocking him a little. He forgot about Kandy Melore and the hostile RIA, and just held Matt. Dyson and Johnson could take care of everything else.

Fuck. Matt was alive. His leg was a twisted, semi-molten hunk of metal, he had bad burns on his other leg, and he was unconscious. James shuddered, sobbing in a breath, and then shuddered again. He could feel wind kicking up, dust swirling around him and Matt, but he couldn't be bothered to see what was up. He heard something striking flesh. Hard. Like a neutral particle bolt to the body. Then another. But it wasn't him and it wasn't Matt, and he didn't look.

James just shook, and held on, and rested his head in the crook of Matt's warm neck.

WHAT a clusterfuck. The whole fucking thing. From the time the grampas had called him twenty-four hours ago until now, he'd known this was going to be a mess.

Laslo stood at the open bay door of the hovering skimmer. Dyson was kicking some guy in the kidneys, but the guy had twenty centimeters and ten kilos on him, and was wearing a blast helmet to boot. Dyson had taken his off. Matt was down, and Laslo could only assume the guy hunching over him was his new boy toy. Or rather, Matt was the guy's boy toy.

And there was a screaming woman dancing around and shaking her hands. Could this be the nun? Most hysterical nun he'd ever seen. Shouldn't she be praying or something?

He wanted to give more thought to that, but he had to get Dyson's ass out of it right now. "Neutralize the guy on Dyson," he said to Sabine, and she took the shot to the guy's neck so fast he figured she'd already been there, just waiting on his order. Or not. He'd probably just managed to get the order in before she took the shot.

Then she took another shot. This time Laslo was definitely a step behind her. The other RIA guy on the ground had barely stirred. He raised an eyebrow at her. She grinned happily, and then returned to covering the other seemingly unconscious RIA soldier in the southeast corner.

The partly vaporized guy probably didn't need watching. He seemed to be missing a head. And most of his right torso. Or maybe that was a woman, actually. Had been a woman.

Laslo looked back toward Dyson just in time to catch his thumbs-up. The nun (?) had stopped the shrieking and

was rushing over to Matt, too, now.

Dyson's com was clearly out, since Laslo had already tried it three times. Dyson was moving toward Matt and his entourage, leaning down to speak to the guy holding Matt. The skimmer was so quiet, Laslo could almost hear Dyson's words from his position twenty meters above.

Dyson had one hand on the guy's shoulder, talking quietly but urgently into his ear. "What's that guy's name again?" Laslo asked Sabine.

"You're lame," Sabine returned.

"'Cause I can't remember a name?"

"He's one of our extraction targets. And he's Matt's new boyfriend."

Laslo cringed. That's probably why he'd forgotten the guy's name. Because he had Matt to think about. He hated to see his cousin get tied down to one guy when there were so many hot ones available and panting after him.

"What's his name?" He growled his most intimidating command voice.

Sabine stuck out her tongue at him. All of the women in their family had a serious genetic flaw: they were immune to the command voice. "First Lieutenant James Ayala," she said in a snotty tone.

"If you weren't my sister…." Laslo knew the threat was pointless. She grinned into her targeting comp.

"We're going to need a hydro-lift basket and medic on the ground," he ordered into his com. That meant Bollinger. They didn't have a med-bot. Laslo hated the fucking things and had "overlooked" the necessity.

"'M'I going down, Major?" asked Jude.

"No, I'm going," Laslo answered, surprising himself. Mostly he'd said it because he could tell by Jude's voice

that he was eager to go. One of Laslo's joys in life was giving Jude shit. "And Leondri. You're on close recon. Jude, you're on the bay with Sabine. The recon-drone is feeding directly into the Brain-links. Keep your heads out, people. Unfriendlies're close." The skimmer or drone should be able to detect anyone approaching, but sometimes equipment malfunctioned. Or was outsmarted.

They already knew they couldn't get live satellite feeds on their Brain-links, just the recon-drone they'd sent out. Jude had set up e-bombs earlier to take out all the boosters in order to keep the RIA from long-range com. When Van had clicked in with unfriendlies, Laslo ordered all the e-bombs and old-fashioned explosives at Brownlee detonated. The station was effectively incommunicado and grounded. Lance Corporal Jude Barlow-Kell did demolition very well.

Once on the ground, Laslo could see Dyson didn't seem to be making any progress with Lt. Ayala. The guy still had his head in Matt's neck. Bollinger wasn't getting far with checking out Matt. Laslo smirked. A med-bot never would have been able to deal with that.

"Lieutenant Ayala!" Laslo barked.

Ayala looked up. Then he sighed, gently laid Matt on the ground, and stood up. He closely watched Bollinger tend to Matt. Ayala had a minor cut on his forehead, and a deeper one on his arm. Laslo reached over and pulled out a small piece of shrapnel from it. Ayala looked down at his arm dispassionately, then back at Matt.

"He's okay, I know. I just…."

"Aren't you going to salute?" Laslo asked, more curious than pissed. SOUF was a pretty informal branch of the military. And he was an especially informal officer.

"Aren't you Matt's cousin, also?" James returned, looking puzzled. His eyes flew right back to Matt.

“Yeah.”

“Then no.” James seemed so preoccupied with what was happening with Matt, he was barely paying attention to Laslo.

“Oh. Another cousin,” the nun said in a disgusted tone. Laslo looked over at her. She was holding Matt’s hand and looking down at him.

Th’fuck? He turned to Dyson, who was standing at attention.

“Sir! The RIA—”

“You aren’t even in the military, yet.”

“Practice, sir!”

“Shut up, Dyson. Give it a rest and just tell me what the fuck happened.”

Dyson looked disappointed. But he cut the military shit. Except he couldn’t seem to keep himself from standing at parade rest. “Well, they snuck up on us—Van’s probably knocked out down by the waterline somewhere.”

“Leondri’s on recon. She’ll get him. He out for good?”

“James didn’t think so.”

“He’s not,” James interrupted absently. Laslo stared at him a second, but James had gone back to watching Bollinger package up Matt.

Laslo raised an eyebrow at Dyson. He raised both back.

So, Dyson thought the guy was legit. “Go on,” Laslo sighed.

Dyson gave him the blow-by-blow—heavy on details Laslo didn’t particularly care about—and Laslo let him go on until he came to the part about the tall redheaded RIA soldier.

“He deployed the grenade?”

“Yeah.” Dyson sounded as puzzled as Laslo was.

“He asked for extraction,” James interjected. He was bending over to help Bollinger secure Matt to the lift basket. “He’s queer. We ran into him outside Cambridge. I trust him,” James added, finally looking up at Laslo.

“Guess I would too, under the circumstances. Where is he?”

James looked blank. Then he turned back to Bollinger, who was bringing the remote down from the skimmer.

“He’s Logan, right?” The nun was looking at James. He nodded absently as he harnessed Matt’s lift basket to the remote, Bollinger looking on in annoyed patience. “That’s all I know. It’s his first name. He’s gay too, I think.” She sounded… resigned?

“He’s over at the southeast corner of the camp.” Dyson interrupted Laslo’s thoughts. “The blast knocked him out. He’s unconscious, but I didn’t figure out any more than that before the other guy was on me.”

And that was another thing. “You said it was a disruptor. Disruptor-frag?” Dyson nodded. That explained some of the superficial wounds on James. The shrapnel was more nuisance than danger. The real damage came from the complete meltdown of weapons. “What’s with a blast like that?”

“She—Kandy Melore—was taking a shot at Matt when it went off.” Dyson swallowed and looked a little green, but met Laslo’s eye.

“Blew up her laser, huh?” Laslo tried not to smile at his little brother’s pallor. It had to be an ugly thing to see. Not that he should have been looking. “You watched it? Why didn’t you shield your eyes?” Laslo began gearing up for a lecture.

“No. No, just saw her after.” Dyson swallowed again, then again. Laslo felt an uncomfortable stab of sympathy. He puked his guts out the first time he saw someone missing a head. He laid a hand on Dyson’s shoulder. Dyson looked at him in something like shock. Laslo dropped his hand.

“Okay, I’ll take a look at this Logan. You check on Leondri—”

Leondri broke in on Laslo’s com just then to report that Van was conscious but groggy. Laslo ordered them aboard the skimmer. “C’mon, Dyson. Get the nun on the skimmer. Then you’re with me.”

Dyson had no visible wounds. He must have been farther from the blast. Bollinger hadn’t seemed concerned with James’s wounds. Or interested. Van would need Bollinger’s attention on the skimmer, when he could spare it from Matt. Dyson was his only choice, unless he wanted to switch him out with Leondri. But Laslo’s neck was getting itchy. He wanted out of here.

When his neck itched, it usually meant nothing good was coming.

If this RIA guy hadn’t helped—or asked for extraction—he wouldn’t bother. But they owed the guy. Laslo wasn’t a particularly nice guy in general, but where his family was concerned he was willing to go the extra mile.

It took Logan a while to figure out he wasn’t dead. For starters, he’d been under the impression that one garnered more attention when one arrived in the afterlife. He could hear voices, but they weren’t coming any closer or talking to him at all. Couldn’t they find him? Had he come to the wrong place?

He could hear the droning of night insects. Did they have those in heaven? Or hell? Probably hell, annoying little fuckers. Prolly had mosquitoes too. Big fuckers, that made you itch all over with one bite. If he was in charge of hell, that's what he'd do. One of the things.

He'd definitely make it this black. He blinked again, trying to bring something into focus, but nothing changed. He'd always figured hell would be pitch-black. Except when you got close to the brimstone. He could see some brimstone glowing right over there, actually, past his feet. And some figures. Demons?

This ignoring people thing? He didn't know what that meant. Another clue he'd gone to hell, because it was annoying. Really annoying. When you showed up in the afterlife, it didn't occur to you that no one would *notice*. That was just… torture.

So, hell, then. Shit. It was the gay thing, wasn't it? He was gay, and he'd gone to hell. If he'd died last week, before he met the guys from Oregon, would he have gone to hell, then? Before he'd finally admitted to someone, out loud, that he was gay?

Well, that was just fucked. Guess he wasn't gonna see Momma again.

Logan closed his eyes and drifted….

Suddenly, something touched him. He jerked in shock and opened his eyes. At first, all he saw was a kind of bluish glow, like a wand gave off. Some supernatural thing, he supposed. Slowly, his eyes brought the dark blob in front of his face into focus.

It was an angel. Who knew angels were so hot? *Shit*. Well, they were definitely going to send him to hell, now, if he wasn't already there. He was lusting after an angel.

In battle armor. An Asian angel dressed like a soldier. With a shaved head. A Buddhist monk Asian angel wearing battle armor? He could feel his brow wrinkling. “What’re you wearing that for? You one a those ’venging angels?”

The angel spoke slowly. “No. I’m Major Laslo Gao-Longue, Delta 6, Blue States of America Special Operations Unified Force.”

Huh? Logan stared at him a minute, and slowly realized there was another… angel… behind the stud-angel. But he looked familiar….

“I’m not dead, am I?”

The totally hot angel smiled. *Now* he looked like a demon. He had really nice eyes. Pale chocolate, maybe. Was that a color? It was the best he could come up with. Pale chocolate, with long lashes. Logan lifted a hand and ran a finger across the stud-angel’s lips, pulling the lower one down, then releasing it with a wet *plop* when his finger got too far south. “Nice,” he breathed.

“You’re not dead,” the angel said.

Logan felt his brow furrow again. Wait a minute. That meant…. “So, you’re not an angel?”

The other angel, the one barely in his field of vision, started laughing and snorting. Stud-angel smiled. “No, I’m not an angel.” He turned to the assistant, um, not-angel, and said, “Need your field med kit.”

JAMES couldn’t seem to reconnect with reality. Ever since he saw Kandy Melore shoot Matt—even if it was just in the leg—it was like he’d lost touch with everything outside his own head. And Matt’s. He could still feel him there. Unconscious, but alive, just drifting along.

James was willing to let go of reality and let all the SOUF troops surrounding them deal with Matt's safety—he could feel how concerned they were, and capable—and just try to deal with what had happened. Matt had almost died. Because of him.

Like a bad romance cliché (not that he read them, of course), James couldn't help wondering again if Matt wouldn't be better off without him. Right now it seemed like Matt's life expectancy would be longer if James took himself out of the picture. Matt's life expectancy seemed more important than his own.

It was quiet in the skimmer, the medic (Bollinger?) had done what he could for Matt, and left him to James to go look over the other guy, Van. Van and the medic talked quietly, but the troops covering the bay doors and the one checking out her gear were silent and vigilant. James couldn't see the pilot or junior from where he was. He had his butt on the floor, leaning against the rear equipment storage, Matt's head in his lap. Not a lot of comforts in a skimmer, just utilitarian space. Matt at least had a stretcher to lie on.

Once again, Matt was on a drug cocktail that would likely leave him loopy as hell when he came to. This time, someone managed to tell the medic how sensitive Matt was before the guy drugged him up. James watched Matt's face, running his fingers through his pale bangs.

Ah, shit. They were going to have to talk about this. James couldn't go around feeling like he was a danger and a burden on Matt without being sure Matt wanted him. He was barely sure he could do it if Matt did want him. But he was sure he couldn't do much of anything without Matt.

He just needed Matt to be conscious, and alive, and talking. That was all he needed in the world.

THE big, goofy militia guy was beginning to regain his grasp on reality. Maybe. What was his name again? Logan.

"Logan?"

"Sir?"

Laslo rolled his eyes. *Hello. Enemy, here*. Well, technically an enemy, but he guessed not in reality. "You feeling any clearer?"

"Uhhhh. Yeah?"

Not quite reassuring. Laslo's neck was getting itchier by the second. "How you feel about moving to Oregon?"

"Bring'er on." That sounded just a bit too glib, but he wasn't willing to quibble when they were in hostile territory, violating the no-fly truce, and they were going to get visitors wearing the Red Idaho Authority arm badge any minute.

And fuck the Conservation of Medical Resources Directive. He was treating an enemy soldier because he'd been a friendly under fire. And because Laslo liked saying fuck the rules sometimes. It tended to get him promoted.

Wait, that last promotion had sucked. He'd been bound to a desk ever since. Laslo readjusted his personal goal to demotion.

Logan was big and rangy, with freckles everywhere, at least on his face, arms, and chest, since Laslo hadn't found a reason to cut his pants off him, yet. He'd had to hook him up to the field automated external defibrillator according to procedure, so that had taken care of his shirt. Or what was left of it after Laslo had immobilized Logan's neck with the cervical-field that held his head still.

Logan had sort of soft, brown-red hair, cropped tight, but not a jarhead cut. It almost matched the freckles. And

his eyes were this strange dark hazel that Laslo didn't think he'd ever seen. At least it looked that way in the wand light with his NV lenses on.

Not the kind of guy Laslo was usually interested in. But Laslo wanted to see the guy move all those military-honed muscles, wanted to see how much Logan loomed over him when he stood up, and how hot he looked lying under him, giving it up for him.

Ah, the smell of lust on the battlefield. Warmed the cockles of a gay trooper's heart, didn't it? What was hotter than finding a big, sexy enemy combatant and taking him home to play with?

Maybe grinding your ass into the enemy's hard cock while he writhed on the dance floor behind you, plastered to you from head to toe? That could be hotter.

Mostly Laslo was thinking these things as a distraction, because he knew the shit was about to hit the fan. Recon from the drone-bot kept telling him there was a team on the way from Brownlee Station. On foot, of course. He bet that just bunched their panties.

"Lance Corporal," Laslo commed Jude on the Brain-link. "I'm shutting down my drone feed. Keep me updated." It would just annoy and distract him, and half the skimmer was getting the same info. Jude could relay. He already had to relay to the half of the team that didn't have Brain-links. You had to be at least an NCO to get one. And QESA didn't have the resources to put them in their agents.

Laslo looked up from administering a stim-narco cocktail and saw Logan's eyes clearing a little more, then latching on to Dyson with interest. He tried to push aside the stab of annoyance that caused.

"Weren't you here before? Like when I, uh…." He seemed to get lost.

“When you set off the disruptor-frag?” Dyson asked, smiling down at him. That little fucker was always smiling. With those fucking cute dimples he inherited from his dad. Slutty little flirt. They were on a battlefield, here!

“Yeah. That.”

“Yeah. What happened to you?”

“Don’ know. Big ball of light, flew through the air, hit my back on something. Seems okay, though. Can’t feel it, anyway.”

Laslo froze. Shit. Fucking shit. He flicked a look up to Dyson. The kid hadn’t caught that. He looked down at Logan’s restless arms and still legs. Then up at the boulder he was lying in front of. *Fuck*.

Nine hundred meters, Major. You have less than ten. Jude’s “voice” floated in his aural net.

“How fast can Bollinger get back here?” He got the long-click back. Standby.

Three minutes, sir.

“Okay, need him with a package.” Laslo turned to Dyson. “Go back and take the remote up when Bollinger comes down. Move, Dyson,” he said when he knew the kid was going to argue. He used his older-brother voice, which had more effect on Dy than his command voice. Mom would fucking kill him if something happened to her baby. Or worse, she’d turn him over to Gramma Anais. Laslo shuddered.

“’S’wrong?” Logan asked blearily.

“Some of your friends are moving in, bud.”

Logan’s momentary confusion cleared up while Laslo moved down to his feet. “Not my friends,” he said, sounding like a stubborn eight-year-old.

“Logan, can you move your feet for me?”

“Yeah.” Long pause. “Can you help me find ’em?”

“Right here, bud.” Laslo tapped on Logan’s boot with his hand.

“Huh? Where?” Logan was trying to lift his head off the ground, straining his neck to see Laslo, but the c-field held him in place.

Laslo used the butt of his rifle and tapped harder. “Here.”

“Can see you, but….” He looked confused as hell.

“Not a problem. We’ll get it worked out, buddy.” If Logan knew him at all he’d realize how bad things must be for Laslo to call him “buddy.”

Slowly, Laslo moved up Logan’s legs, tapping. He found a sharp object in his u-vest and started poking through Logan’s armor-camos with it. Nothing. Shit.

Bollinger came up with the extendable board. The lift must be back at the skimmer. “Bad?”

Bollinger was a man of few words. With few syllables.

“Yeah. Spine, I think.”

Bollinger nodded distractedly, and started poking at Logan all over again. Laslo barely refrained from pointing out he’d already done that. Bollinger was faster at it, anyway.

“Yeah, nothin’.” Bollinger looked at him, waiting for orders.

“Package him.”

Bollinger hesitated. “’S gonna take ten minutes, Major. Can’t do it wrong, or they might never get him hooked up again.”

He might never have a working spinal column again, in other words. Shit.

“’S goin’ on?” Logan was starting to look alarmed. It was sinking in.

“You have a damaged spinal column, looks like,” Bollinger answered before Laslo could take control of the situation.

Logan’s face paled and his mouth opened, just a little, in shock. His head thudded to the ground. Laslo shot Bollinger a dirty look. It bounced off him.

Three minutes, *Major*, came Jude’s voice in his net. “Moving to click only.” He double clicked. Laslo automatically double clicked back.

“They can do this in Boise, Major,” Bollinger said, looking at him levelly.

Laslo looked at him a few seconds. They needed to get the hell out of here.

Fuck!

“Clean up and cover us.” Bollinger sprang into action, taking off the field AED while Laslo moved to Logan’s head. Then Bollinger was up, covering their position from the south. The rest of the stuff wasn’t critical to recover, but field AEDs were expensive little fuckers, and someone in SpecOps Accounting would have their ass if they left it. Not to mention he didn’t know if it was standard equipment for RIA militiamen, and they might notice it sitting there when they came marching up.

“Logan, gonna have to leave you, buddy.” Inexplicably, Laslo felt like throwing up.

“You said I was going to Oregon.” Logan looked like he was about to cry. Not mad or betrayed, just crushed. Something twisted in Laslo’s chest.

“You will, I promise.” Laslo started pulling off the IV vial and picking up the little med kit detritus. Trying to make it look like Logan hadn’t received help. Like he’d

doctored himself. It could happen. Even the c-field. You know, if you were gullible. “Listen to me. You’re the only survivor. You used your own med kit.” Laslo searched Logan’s utility armor until he found it. “And administered your own drugs, okay?” Logan just looked at him while Laslo cleared the med kit of the appropriate supplies. He dumped the drugs out on the ground, leaving the packaging littered around. Logan wasn’t answering. “Okay?”

Finally, Logan nodded.

“They’ll grow you a new spine in the vet tech center in Boise, and when you can travel, I’ll come back for you.” Laslo looked him in the eye as he said it. Logan had to know he was sincere.

“You’re coming? You promise?” He looked so terrified and vulnerable and hopeful, Laslo couldn’t help himself. He leaned down and gave Logan a quick kiss.

“Promise,” Laslo whispered against his lips.

Logan’s face relaxed a little, and he shut his eyes. Laslo started to move back. Logan’s hand shot out and grabbed him. “Promise?”

“Yeah. I promise, Logan. I’m coming back to get you.” Even if he had to do it on his own time. “Then I’m dragging your hot ass out on some dance floor and grinding against you all night.”

Logan looked startled, but strangely reassured. Laslo pulled back, looking in his eyes. “Bollinger, fall back to the skimmer.” He clicked the fallback signal to the craft.

He started backing, but Logan’s voice stopped him. “You’ve never seen my ass.”

Laslo gave him a quick grin. “More to look forward to.”

—CHAPTER 23—

THEY picked up an unfriendly going back over the Snake. Brownlee Station had gotten their shit together to send out a ground missile. But Holland was not only pilot extraordinaire; he could handle an antimissile laser at the same time. And chew gum. All without a junior pilot.

At least that's what James picked up from the chatter around him, both the verbal and the mental. They'd given him a com, but not a weapon. Probably smart.

He could feel Matt stirring. "Coming to," he said to the medic, who'd harnessed in nearby. The guy set his e-harness to mobile, coming over. He didn't talk much, which was currently one of James's favorite personality traits. Matt's whole damn family seemed like a bunch of chatterboxes.

Just as Matt's mind was hitting conscious levels, the tallish guy with the curly black hair by the door—Jude?—finally said something that caught James's interest.

"Th'fuck? Is that a *horse* swimming the river?"

James head shot up. Shit. He'd forgotten Miz, and now she was alone. Not that they could have fit her on the skimmer, but maybe he could've… what? Given her his address? His head was too muddled to make contact, even though he tried.

"James." Matt's voice re-centered his attention.

“Matty?”

“That sounds like a girl’s name.”

James gave Matt a weak smile and leaned down, giving him a gentle kiss. “Miz is swimming the river.”

“Don’t worry, babe. She’ll find you.” Matt squeezed his hand and seemed to fade out again.

Babe. James soaked it up. No one had ever used an endearment for him. Unless he counted “dude,” “asshole,” or “cocksucker.” “Dude” was generally used in the more tender moments. Like, “harder, dude, pound my ass!”

“Daddy” was not an endearment of any sort in his reckoning.

He sighed and leaned his head back against the storage wall, letting the medic check Matt over as well as he could with James pressed up tight against Matt’s head, stroking his hair. The medic never complained, and James didn’t offer to move.

They took the skimmer to Forward Operating Base Joseph, and then caught a Feng Niao to Weimer. Matt came to when they switched aircraft. Long enough to say goodbye to Beni, who was being sent to an NACC convent in the Willamette Valley. She was pissed about it too.

Until they loaded a still slightly woozy Van Vanos on the same craft with her, so he could head back to QESA HQ. Then she started cooing over him and forgot all about the convent. James wondered idly if Beni was going to join the mile-high club and lose her virginity at the same time. Van looked like easy pickin’s.

The medic had pumped Matt full of nano-menders for the burns, and James could already see improvement when they hit the brightly lit field at the Weimer Airbase. By morning he would have pink skin and some itching, the

medic said. James was pretty sure that was the longest sentence he'd said all night.

"Works faster in skin," he added.

Just before touching down, Matt came to again.

"We're almost home," James told him, leaning in to say it in his ear, brushing his lips against the whorl. Matt shivered a little. He turned his head and kissed James slowly.

"If my family's waiting, you might need to back off a little. Give them time at me. You know."

"I know." Even if it sucked.

"And my dad, he's kinda weird. Freaks out if I get too touchy with a boyfriend."

James started to frown, but Matt quickly went on. "It's not a gay thing, babe. He's the same way if Andry has a girlfriend. Freaks him out to think of his kids getting any."

"Okay." James didn't know what to say. He suddenly felt like time was running out for them.

Matt was closing off his mind again. James could tell it was habit, now. He didn't even realize he was doing it.

"'Sides, your dad will prolly be there, right?" Matt asked. James shrugged, stifling the sardonic snort that wanted out. "And Lance will want to talk to you."

"'S'okay, baby. You just worry about your family. We need to talk, soon, but tonight be with them."

"Gah. 'We need to talk'? Those are, like, the four scariest words in the English language."

James managed a smile for the joke. Matt looked a little puzzled, and even alarmed. "I'll come by tomorrow, babe. We can talk then."

Matt looked a lot puzzled and alarmed now. “Tomorrow? Um, okay.” He looked like he wanted to ask, and James was hoping he would, *Aren’t you staying with me tonight?*

But he didn’t. And then they touched down. Getting Matt off the Feng Niao took work and coordination in the tight space, and there were too many people around and things going on for them to talk again.

Matt’s family was waiting. His parents, brother, Anais, and the grampas. And some other people James could only guess at. Not to mention the team that had extracted him.

James let himself get shunted off to the side, away from Matt, when Gabi Viteaux-Tennimore grabbed on to her son. He could see Matt’s dad, Finley, right behind her, reaching in to touch Matt’s arm.

James looked around. No surprise, but his own father wasn’t there. Probably finding out he had a gay son was too much of a shock for him.

He looked on for a while, watching Matt’s family chatter away. The love and relief they all felt was so tangible, James thought he could almost see it. It looked like a swirling cloud of red and cream, enveloping them. For a few seconds, James wondered if he was starting to see auras. But he shook his head hard, and the visual went away.

The feeling of being excluded didn’t leave, though.

He was so caught up in watching the reunion—with a barely conscious man at its center—that he didn’t realize anyone was standing next to him.

“Welcome home, James.” James turned his head. It was Lance. He’d never really met the guy, except on the vid hookup.

“Lieutenant Colonel.” James saluted.

“Can it, Ayala. Call me Lance. Or Kell if you can’t stomach Lance. You’re as good as discharged and I’m retired. You and Matt have to appear at a hearing tomorrow at 1800, and then it’s official, but the deal’s already been made. Just what we talked about in Cambridge.”

James swallowed. “So, um, Matt has to go?”

Lance slanted him a look. “Yeah. Need his testimony. I thought you’d want him with you.”

“Well, yeah.” Shit. How to ask this. “I just don’t want him to be stuck with me, sir.”

“Don’t call me ‘sir’, either.”

“Uh, okay, Lance, sir.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “Listen, James, Matt needs to be there tomorrow night, and unless he gets barred by his doctor he will be. And if you’re wondering about the future…?” Lance gave an exaggerated lift of his eyebrows. As in “go on, boy.”

James just kept himself from standing at attention. “Yes. I’d like to make sure that if Matt doesn’t want to, he won’t have to work with me. As a team, I mean. Just in case things, um, change.”

Lance stared at him. It was a little intimidating. The guy was big, and still vital, even in his seventies. And James was fucking his grandson. “What are you worried about, James?”

James took a breath. “I’m not sure it’s good for his life expectancy to hang around with me.”

“I think that’s his decision. Unless you don’t want him to ‘hang around’ with you.”

“I do want him hanging around.” Jesus, he felt like a teenager, having this conversation with his date’s mildly threatening father figure.

“Are you going to try to make that decision for him?”

“No. I’m going to discuss it with him first, sir.”

“Don’t call me sir,” Lance snapped absently.

James managed not to snort. He watched Lance stare off into his family’s impromptu celebration. Finally Lance refocused on him. “You have a job with QESA, James, no matter what. But if you hurt my grandson I can’t promise to be a pleasant boss.” He paused a second, then softened his voice a little. “Things will work out for the best, James. Give it a chance.”

Then Lance’s whole demeanor changed, becoming more professional. “Now, there are a few things I need to tell you. I told you already the Boulder Blue cell escapees said the report of your detainment in the re-education camp didn’t come from them. Things there were chaos since right after Boulder fell. No one knows of any extractee reports coming out of there.

“We still don’t know how you were found or who reported your location. But SOUF has someone in custody. One of the original scientists on the project, McNeel Blau. He’s the scientist who testified to the Pentagon that the implant project was ready for beta-testing in troops. He’s also been the sole oversight for project data and assessment since you and the others were implanted.”

James felt too out of touch with reality to absorb the significance of what Lance was saying. “So… one guy’s responsible for the whole program?”

“Seems unlikely, doesn’t it? For one thing, he had to put together the surgical team. They’re being questioned. He almost had to have help, and he’s saying he was

following orders, but refuses to give up names until SOUF cuts an immunity deal with him."

James felt like laughing. Some fucker potentially ruined the rest of his life, and who knew how many others, and he wanted immunity? "How many others?" James asked roughly.

"Five. There were six of you altogether." James could feel Lance's eyes on him, and he turned to look. "No one knows who any of them are, except you. Anonymity was necessary to protect the data, according to Blau. He claims to not even know the implantee names himself."

James was speechless. There were so many things wrong with the picture. It was overwhelming. "I know about one other guy," he offered.

"Anais knows that. Forget about it for tonight, son." *Son*? "You and Matt will be debriefing with Major General Selkirk and Anais tomorrow after the discharge hearing. You can think about it then. For now just be careful. I think my grandson cares very much about your life expectancy too."

So James did exactly that. He let it all go. He'd deal with it tomorrow. After he dealt with the more important issue of his future with Matt.

"Someone over there is waiting to talk to you." Lance gave a chin jerk, indicating someone was standing behind James. He clapped his hand on James's shoulder and walked away.

James turned around slowly. He had a bad feeling about this. An entirely justified bad feeling. It was his father. Pop was wearing the same stony expression James often adopted.

This could go either way.

Pop shook his hand. That was James's greeting from the father he hadn't seen in more than three years.

"Hey, Pop," he said uncomfortably.

"James." He got a head nod.

It took exactly seventeen more words to decide that James would first go to the base clerk and get his ID reinstated and Blue chip turned back on, then Pop would take him "back to my place."

Apparently, it wasn't James's home anymore. James sighed and bounced along beside his father in the old electric flatbed.

The ID reinstatement took a while, with the instant DNA identification test, and James had to com with the Psi-force duty officer. Even if he was getting discharged and everyone knew it, they all still pretended not to and did everything by regulation.

James wouldn't even have bothered, but he had a sneaking suspicion he'd need to be a part of the military machine again, at least for tonight. Morning, whatever. Even if it was just to have a place to sleep after he had it out with his father.

At the ranch house, Pop was nice enough to offer him a beer first. Then he started in.

"So, they say you're a fag." Pop held himself stiffly, and for a second James could see a flicker of hope in his eye.

"Yep," he said casually, then burped. It seemed appropriate. He looked Pop in the eye, waiting for the blowup. He'd been waiting his whole life for this.

Instead, Pop wilted. "Ah, fuck," he muttered, running a hand through his hair. Then he looked up again. "You're sure?"

"Yeah, Pop. And I've sucked enough cock to prove it."

“Don’t say that shit in my home!”

“What, cock?” He *could* be the bigger man, here, and not say incendiary shit, but he was annoyed and his heart hurt and this fucker who’d barely given him the time of day his whole life was about to kick him out, so fuck it.

His father took a step forward, like maybe he was thinking about hitting James. James let a smirk break out. The old man knew he was beat before he even started. James would mop up the floor with him. “Whatsa matter? Afraid your fag son’ll kick your ass?”

His father swallowed uncomfortably. “Your mother said this was going to happen.”

“What?” James swallowed now.

“She said if we stayed here, you’d end up like this. ’S’why she left, she couldn’t stand to see her son turn into a fairy.”

“*What?*” He had to be making this shit up. But he wasn’t.

“I thought she was nuts. Wanted to stay because we could make so much more than if we went back to Idaho. More government protections, better trade restrictions. Better relationships with the markets in Asia. Shoulda fucking listened to her,” he finished in a mutter.

“Mom left because she thought living here would turn me gay?” James needed to make sure he had this shit straight in his mind.

Pop sneered, but just nodded, staring challengingly at James.

Oh, he so didn’t need to take this shit. Fuck ’em. Pop could age and die alone, as far as he was concerned.

James took two steps forward and got right in his father’s face. “News flash, Pop. If anyone ‘made’ me gay, it

was you. Or mom. It's genetic, you fucking prick. I was born gay."

"A Red state could have made you straight. Re-educated you." His father didn't back down. He believed he was totally in the right.

James snorted. This was pointless. "Yeah, I had their version of straight shoved down my throat. Guess what the suicide rate for people who get out of re-education camp 'cured' is, Pop? Seventy percent. And that's a Red state statistic. The Blue estimate is higher. I met a guy in Idaho who's in his thirties, and he's hidden he's gay his whole life, because he doesn't want to die. He thinks either someone's gonna kill him, or he's gonna get fucked up in re-education. His *whole fucking life* he's lied about what he is because the alternative is death as far as he's concerned. I'm not fucking living that way. If you can't handle it, I'll get my shit out of here and you won't ever see me again."

Silence. His Pop looked down at the floor after a minute, unable to hold his gaze. James snorted softly and walked off to his old room. He couldn't sense any regret or forgiveness from his father. Not even sadness. Just disappointment and resignation.

James had maybe a half dozen things he wanted out of here. Really, he could live without any of it, but there was one thing he'd really like to have. He lay down on the floor and reached up under his old chest of drawers. It took a minute, but he found the false bottom, and then the chip. He took it out and looked at it.

It didn't look like much, but it contained about ten stills of Matt from some kegger in high school. Matt, fully clothed, smaller, a little awkward and a lot drunk.

How pathetic was it that he'd jerked off to those a couple hundred times? James sighed. Pretty fucking

pathetic.

He stood up and dropped the chip in his pocket, reached for the old-fashioned print still of Gramma, picked up a watch from Grampa, threw in a change of clothes that might still fit him. He could get more on the base if he had to.

He hesitated a moment, but then he grabbed the family bible his mother had left for him. It detailed her family for generations. He couldn't imagine why he wanted it, but….

James grabbed the keys to the "family" vehicle on the way through the kitchen, taking them off the hook. They'd always had an electric plugged in out in the garage, but it rarely got used when he'd lived at home. He'd had his crotch rocket in high school.

On the way through the family room—lot of family shit in a house that had never had much of a family—he stopped and looked at his father. "You can pick up your vehicle at the base whenever. I'll leave it in the visitor lot. Sorry you couldn't accept me, Pop. Have a nice life." Pop was all anger now. Dissatisfaction.

Driving through the pitch-black early morning countryside, James tried to figure out how he felt. He didn't seem to feel mad, much, or sick at heart, or guilty. He just felt mostly numb.

And maybe a tiny bit lighter.

JUST after breakfast, James took off for the Tennimore place in a motor pool SVO. The military cooked with enough grease. Big of them to fuel their vehicles with it too.

Part of him didn’t want to have this conversation, but more of him was terrified of not having it. He couldn’t just let things go on the way they were. Wondering how Matt really felt—obligated? Trapped? Bored?—would kill him.

He was ready to admit it wasn’t just worry about whether Matt would get hurt again. Matt had a dangerous job, and he could get hurt again at any time. When it came down to it, James would feel better if he was around Matt so he could protect him. Even if the risk was somewhat elevated being around James.

His real worry came back to why Matt hid himself from James. Yeah, Matt let him in when they had sex and some other times, but most of the time he cut himself off. What if those times James had been sure Matt felt the same way he did, it had just been afterglow or something? Extreme stress brought on by being in life-threatening situations? Pity?

Gabi Viteaux-Tennimore let him in. She gave a little gasping cry, and for a second James thought she was going to slam the door in his face. Then she lunged at him and hugged him, nearly knocking him over.

“Thank you,” she said when she’d squeezed him tight then let him go.

“Um, you’re welcome?”

She smiled at him. “Thank you for saving Matt. A few times, from the sound of it.”

“Oh, uh, I didn’t really…. I mostly had help.” Jesus, he was blushing. He could feel it.

Gabi dragged him into the kitchen, past the back door that led out to the deck, and the bunkhouse. Wasn’t that where Matt stayed? Shouldn’t he be going there?

“Do you want some coffee?”

“No, ma’am, I’m fine. Thanks.”

“Please, don’t call me ma’am,” Gabi said with some bite in her tone. “Call me Gabi.”

“Oh, sorry, um, Gabi.” James looked down at the floor. He felt too muddled to even try to get a read on Gabi.

“And you can call me Finley,” Matt’s dad said as he walked in. Jesus, was the brother going to show up too? If anyone else walked in, he was making a break for the bunkhouse.

James shook Finley’s hand, assured them both he was fine, and really, no thank you, he didn’t need coffee, orange juice, or a donut.

Soon, James realized Gabi was messing with him. She was keeping him here, making him squirm because she thought it was *cute*.

Finley was just kinda clueless.

James gave Gabi a narrow-eyed look. What was with Matt’s family? Gabi smirked a little, then said, “Why don’t you go on out to the bunkhouse? I imagine Matt’s just thinking about rising.”

God, he hoped so. And maybe he’d be ready to get out of bed too.

James broke an indoor land-speed record getting to the back door. As he walked out on the deck, he saw the door to the bunkhouse opening. Matt was coming out. James’s fantasy of finding Matt still in bed, warm and sleepy with morning wood, disintegrated. It was for the best, anyway. They really needed to talk.

Matt was wearing only lightweight cotton pants. No shirt, no shoes. He’d accessorized with crutches, his knuckles white where he gripped them. His right pant leg was tied in a knot to keep it from dragging on the ground.

Matt stopped suddenly when he caught sight of James. He looked sort of embarrassed. About the leg? James cocked his head, trying to figure it out.

“You caught me before I had a chance to put on my spare leg.” Matt was mumbling slightly, not quite meeting James’s eye.

James took a few more steps forward and leaned in to give Matt a kiss. “I don’t care,” he said against Matt’s lips. He kept his hands in his pockets, though. Then he stepped back, giving them room.

Matt looked at him like he was trying to puzzle out what was going on. James tried to say something, but his chest ached too much.

Finally Matt came up with something. “You said you wanted to talk. Is that what you’re here for?”

“Yeah.” James cleared his throat.

More silence.

Matt blew out a breath through his nose in exasperation. “James,” he said in his extra-patient voice, “talk.”

“I think we should talk about what’s going to happen now. And in the future.” James took a deep breath in spite of the band around his chest.

Matt stared at him a second, then looked down and muttered something. James waited for more, but nothing came. Finally Matt looked back up, and gave a sharp nod.

James took a deep breath. “I just… I don’t know if you should stay with me.”

“What do you mean, I should stay with you? You aren’t involved in this?”

“No, no, I’m totally involved here, and I’ll stay with you, if that’s what you want.” James had a feeling he wasn’t presenting this quite right. Had the feeling he was steering things off course, helpless to correct. If only this was just a bad training exercise.

“What about what you want?” Matt looked pissed. His mouth was in a tight line, and he was leaning on his crutches, gripping them until his knuckles were white. Whiter. His brow started to wrinkle in anger and confusion.

“I want to stay with you. If you want it. I’m just wondering if that’s what’s best. For you.”

“What about what’s best for you?”

They were going around in circles here.

“I don’t want to talk about that. There’s too much pressure there. I mean, I’m gonna be working with you at QESA, and I just want you to know we don’t necessarily have to work together, *stay* together, unless that’s what we both want. I talked to Lance about it last night.”

James saw a flash of hurt on Matt’s face before he hid it under anger. His jaw was clenching, and he spoke through his teeth. “You talked to my *grandfather* about this?”

Uh-oh. Bad move? Damn, this was not going well at all. He was an idiot without his implant. “Well, yeah. I mean, he’s my boss too, right?”

“You talked to him about *us*?” Still with the clenched teeth.

“No! Just, you know, whether we had to work as a team if we didn’t, you know….”

“No. I don’t know. Why don’t you spell it out for me?” Matt’s voice was suddenly overly solicitous. James wracked

his brain for what that could mean. He was coming up blank, but he was sure it wasn't good.

Jesus, the guy was starting to piss him off. "If we break up," he said baldly.

"Were we together?"

James knew he hadn't managed to keep the shock off his face. "I thought so," he said quietly through numb lips.

"I didn't mean it," Matt said just as quietly. "We were together, James."

Were together?

"It just sounds like you aren't interested in keeping us together now. Like you're trying to talk me into dumping you."

James's voice came out louder this time, much louder. "I don't know if being with me is what's best for you. Jesus, can't you see? I've been trying to tell you, Matt, but it's like you aren't hearing. I want to be with you, but I don't have the foggiest fucking idea how you feel about that. I know you like me, and you like the sex." He snorted in agreement with himself. "And I know you wanted to get me out of Idaho; it's your job. But I don't know anything else, Matt. You shut your mind off from me unless we're fucking!"

"Why wouldn't I want to be with you, James?"

"I'm a fucking liability with a mutant alien brain, Matt. I could go nuclear at any time. Our own fucking government sees me as a science project, and you can bet if Idaho knows I exist other Red states are going to start coming up with the intel eventually. I don't want to ever see you shot again!"

"It was my leg. My artificial leg." He sounded like he was trying to be soothing. James started seeing red.

"Not when that SAIA hit you!"

“You didn’t say any of this, then.” Now he sounded annoyed. Good.

“I didn’t l-like you so much, then.” That was a lame reply. James scowled at himself.

“So you don’t want to stay with me.”

“I *do.* Are you fucking deaf?”

“You sure as fuck don’t sound like it! You keep trying to tell me why we shouldn’t be together, James. Why the fuck *would* I stay with you?”

James was stunned. His brilliant mouth had just talked him out of a boyfriend. *The* boyfriend. The One. Jesus, he was an idiot.

“I need you,” he admitted hoarsely. “I told you, you own me. You’re in control. But I need you to need me, to let me feel it,” he went on. Might as well make a complete fool of himself while he was on a roll. He stared into Matt’s eyes, but there was nothing there. Just blank. He didn’t say a word.

Well, that was that, then.

It was almost painful standing there looking at Matt in the sun. His hair was still long on top, wheat-pale, but his mom must have trimmed it sometime, and he’d shaved. James imagined if he put his hand on the back of Matt’s neck and pulled him in, he’d feel the fresh prickles there on his skin, tickling his palm. He wanted to brush his lips against that spot and nip at Matt’s spine, watching those goose bumps sweep his back as he pushed slowly into the almost painful tightness of Matt’s ass.

But apparently Matt wasn’t sure if that’s what he wanted. Any of it—the making love or the needing. And James wanted out now if that was the case. Looking at Matt, his pajama pants hanging off his hips, one bare foot,

shivering a little in the cool morning sunlight, James felt like if he left it any longer, losing Matt might kill him. If he did it now, it might only feel like losing a leg.

Then they'd match.

He took a step back, Matt squinting at him in the bright light, still silent. James swallowed and started to turn. His chest ached so much more now, soul deep.

"James." Matt's voice stopped him. "It's not easy, you know, having a boyfriend who's an empath. And shows occasional signs of mind-reading. I have to… protect myself, you know?"

James swallowed and nodded, staring at the boards of the deck. The ache had spread into his throat, choking his voice. Matt took a lurching step forward on his crutches.

"I wasn't sure how you felt, either, you know. I needed to think. I need some privacy, sometimes. And I guess I didn't really realize how that must seem to you." Matt reached out, balancing on one crutch, the other dangling from his arm, and slipped a hand around the back of James's head. "But I trust you. I don't care what might happen in your head. We'll deal with it together. And I can let you in mine more, if you need that from me." He pressed his lips against James's just for a second.

Then he lowered all his walls and let James in.

Some of it was a swirling, ambiguous mess. Yes, Matt was scared of what might happen with James's implant, but it was because he was scared *for* James. He wanted to protect him, too, wanted to be with him, give him comfort when he needed it, would give him space if James wanted. Was mad about it, and sometimes at James, and jealous of all the people James could read, because he wanted that intimacy only for himself. Felt insecure and needy and irritated. And hopeful.

But the best was the pulsing red ball in the middle of it, Matt's desire and trust and need and the best, best part —

Matt attacked his mouth, both arms twining about James's neck, the dangling crutches hitting him in the arms and shoulders. James squeezed Matt so hard he forced a surprised "mmmph" out of him.

When they separated, Matt looked at him a second, making sure. "Love you," he said.

James was afraid he might have tears on his face. "Love you too." And then he kissed him again, lifting Matt a little and walking him backward toward the door of the bunkhouse. Matt's crutches clattered to the ground as his leg wrapped around James's waist. James could feel how hard he was, rubbing against his own hard cock.

"'S gonna be so good, Matt," he panted into Matt's mouth. "Making love to you."

"Long as it's soon. Need you inside me, babe." Matt moved up to James's earlobe. "Need you."

"Need you too."

INSIDE the kitchen, under the guise of doing dishes, Gabi watched James mauling her son.

Good. She smiled to herself. She needed to find the vid com, but she just kept watching them fumble their way back into the bunkhouse, Matt's leg wrapped around James's hips, too consumed with each other to let go and focus on the task of getting through a doorway without hitting the frame.

Finley came up behind her and slipped his arms around her waist. He kissed her ear. "Does my little

dominatrix wanna come out and play?” he murmured in her ear.

“Just a minute,” she said, still absorbed in what was going on outside. Finley pulled back and saw she was staring out the window. He looked too.

“Gah!” he shrieked, and sliding a little in his socks, turned and fled into the dining room.

Gabi smirked to herself, and turned to find a vid hookup to call her dads. She had orders to report in on developments in this area.

While spending most of the last three years recovering from Lyme Disease, Anne Tenino started writing again. The Lyme Disease led to the demise of her “real” job, meaning she suddenly had the time. She began writing for her own entertainment in third grade, but life intervened, and she didn’t get around to submitting anything to a publisher until the week of her 40th birthday. In the long, rainy, Pacific Northwest winter, writing is sometimes a mood-saver.

Anne’s husband is adorably confused by her love of reading and writing about man lurve, but he’s always been a supportive sort. Just don’t ask him to read it. Her two school-aged daughters think it’s cool Mom’s a writer but aren’t clear on why they can’t tell Gramma about it.

When not writing, Anne likes to read, travel, cook, and shirk housework.

Visit Anne at http://annetenino.wordpress.com or on Twitter as AnneTenino.

Also by Anne Tenino

http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com

Dreamspinner Press
For more of the best M/M romance, visit
Dreamspinner Press
www.dreamspinnerpress.com